

Unity (Part 4)

The Voice of God

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We humans share a large number of things in common with the other creatures that God has created, but mankind is also unique in quite a number of respects. We have a mind, or better, a spirit that far exceeds anything that an animal might possess. We're able to think spatially. We have hands with fingers and a directly opposing thumb that enables us to handle instruments with a great deal of precision. There is no indication that animals are able to enjoy music, or other forms of art. We have a brain that far exceeds any animal's brain in terms of intelligence and capacity.

We have something else that I haven't yet mentioned that is unique, and is of exceeding importance. And that is, that even though animals can communicate with each other in a limited way—usually through grunts, barks, or some body movement—only mankind has, what can rightly be called, "a voice," which when combined with our mind, enables us to articulate instruction, and to pass it on to others with a great deal of precision.

You are probably not aware that, depending upon the bible translation, the word "voice" appears 217 times in the New International Version of the Bible, and that is the least number in any translation. It appears 325 times in the New Revised Standard Version, which is the most.

One of the interesting things about a voice, according to researchers, is that everybody's voice on earth is unique. Your voice is as unique as your fingerprint! This makes a connection with other persons possible—one that cannot be made in any other way.

In the Song of Songs (or Solomon), the male lover says:

Song of Songs 2:14 "O, my dove who is in the clefts of the rocks and the secret places of the stairs, let me see your countenance; let me hear your voice! For sweet is your voice, and your countenance is comely!"

The male lover here longs to hear his beloved's voice, because it is sweet to him, and reflects her qualities. And upon hearing it, he is immediately warmed by the relationship that they have. But it is that voice that communicates that to him.

Next to the sense of touch—which is by far and away the most expressive of our senses—what conveys the greatest degree of intimacy is the voice.

Let's look at a familiar scripture in the book of John:

John 10:1-4 "I tell you the truth: He who enters not by the door into the sheepfold, but climbs up some other way, the same is a thief and a robber. But he who enters in by the door is the shepherd of the sheep. To Him the porter opens, and the sheep hear his voice, and He calls his own sheep by name, and leads them out. And when He puts forth His own sheep, He goes before them, and the sheep follow Him, for they know His voice."

I used to have sheep and I found that they would in fact recognize me immediately and follow me around. So, I can understand that very clearly. The sheep, like the lover in the Song of Solomon, know the voice because they know the shepherd and trust Him. They trust His voice. They hear (in His voice) safety, security, sustenance, joy, hope, encouragement, love, warmth, and correction that doesn't turn them aside.

The voice is the effective means of communication between Christ and us. The voice not only identifies, but it also communicates concepts to us that reveal both character and emotion.

Matthew 27:46 "And about the ninth hour, Jesus cried with a loud voice, saying, 'Eli, Eli! Lama sabachthani?' that is to say, 'My God, My God! Why have you forsaken Me?..."

How is this voice uttered? What kind of an "edge" did He give to it? Did He reveal some measure of desperation? Was it tinged with grief and anguish? Were the pains of His torment allowed to escape through His lips?

Matthew 27:50 "Jesus, when He had cried again with a loud voice, yielded up the spirit."

Verse 50 shows us (when combined with other scriptures) that He very well may have screamed in pain as the spear was thrust into Him—maybe from his bladder all the way up to his heart. What was communicated both to God and His beloved disciples standing there? Does their hope seem to perish in an undeserved and disgraceful

death?

When a baby cries, experienced mothers are able to tell by the timbre of the cry what the baby wants, or what kind of circumstance it is in. And again, this is something that is shown in the bible in a variety of ways.

In I Samuel 28:12, Saul disguised himself to meet the witch at Endor, and in the course of the encounter, when the witch was asked to call up Samuel, she recognized that this was Saul before her! Her king was before her! And this king had ordered the execution of anybody who had done what she was being asked to do!

I Samuel 28:12 "And when the woman saw 'Samuel,' she cried with a loud voice and the woman spoke to Saul, saying, 'Why have you deceived me? For you are Saul!'"

Here, her voice expresses either fear for her life, or anger at being deceived. But here the alarm in her voice leaves no doubt that a great deal of passion burst forth from her very inner being.

Proverbs 15:1 "A soft answer turns away wrath. But, harsh words stir up anger."

Here the tone of voice soothes, helping greatly to take the edge off an antagonist's anger. There are numerous instances of this shown in the bible. In the book of Judges, Gideon turned aside the animosity of the Ephraimites with a gentle response to their hostility.

Hannah—of whom Eli was quite suspicious, while she was praying, because he thought that she was being presumptuous going before God in a drunken condition—quietly explained that she was not drunk at all, but merely speaking softly to her God in her anguish.

There was also Abigail who turned aside the anger of David as he was just about ready, in his frustration, to kill hardheaded Nabal, her husband. But she turned him aside by convincing him in soft tones that such a thing would be foolish for him to do.

The Reubenites quelled the anger of the tribes on the west side of Jordan who thought that they had built a false god. They quietly said, "No, no, we have only built a

monument to our ties with you."

And so, the restraint and moderation that can be conveyed through the tone of the voice can sometimes express concepts and sentiments better than the words themselves.

The flip side of this is seen in Proverbs 15:1. In the King James Version it says, "grievous words stir up anger." It can also mean "harsh words," words that are biting—said with the wrong kind of edge to them—cutting, and sarcastic. And there are, brethren, far too many people using biting sarcasm in an attempt to be funny, leaving instead a greatly offended person behind.

There is a particularly tragic example of this in Judges 12:1-6, where the Ephraimites were before the judge that God had appointed, and in this case it was Jephthah. They spoke to him in a very sarcastic and biting way, and he was innocent, and it provoked a war. God gave Jephthah the victory, and 42,000 Ephraimites died because of the attitude that came through their voice.

So the scripture tells us that a brother offended is harder to win than a strong city. Their contentions are like the bars of a castle. But, once that edge is put into their heart, it is very hard to bring about reconciliation.

There are undoubtedly times that we are misled by the word "voice" in the bible, and I would say that this occurs especially in the King James Version. Sometimes one might wonder what ever lead them to translate a word like that?

An example of this would be Genesis 4:8, where it says that Adam and Eve heard the voice of the Lord walking in the garden. This is not a figure of speech. It is simply a bad translation. The word that is used there simply means, "sound." That same word is translated "crackling" in Ecclesiastes 7:6. It is translated as "steps" or "footsteps" in II Samuel 5:24; I Kings 14:6; and II Kings 6:32.

And so in Genesis 4:8, it simply means that they heard the footsteps of God walking in the cool of the day in the garden.

The voice of God is especially interesting, since it is specifically and directly indicated about three dozen times. I say "about" because, again, the translations differ, and so the figure might be a bit higher in some translations or a bit lower in others. But, it is how it is used that is so interesting.

In Psalm 29:1-11 David uses "Thunder" as a metaphor for the voice of God. And for the

purpose of instruction, the reason is to make obvious the connection in people's minds between something that everybody is familiar with—the powerful reverberating sound of thunder—connecting it with the power of God's spoken word.

I'm sure that all of you will recall the scene in Exodus 20 when the Israelites were at Mt. Sinai for the giving of the Law. The people heard the voice of God as He gave The Ten Commandments. The Psalmist later says that it was so powerful that the hills skipped to and fro in accompaniment illustrating both the awesome power of God and His word.

In Deuteronomy 4, Moses adds some things to this that are interesting to consider as we go along.

Deuteronomy 4:32 "For ask now of the days that are past which were before you, since the day that God created man upon the earth, and ask from the one side of heaven to the other. Has there been any such thing as this great thing is, or has been heard like it?"

Do you know what this great thing is?

Deuteronomy 4:33 "Did ever a people hear the voice of God speaking out of the midst of the fire, as you have heard, and live?"

You speak about POWER! Those people were TERRIFIED when they heard the voice of God. It shook them to their very being. And that was the purpose!

Deuteronomy 4:34-36 " ...has God assayed to go and take Him a nation from the midst of another nation, by trials, by signs, by wonders, by war, by a mighty hand, by a stretched out arm, and by great terrors, according to all that the LORD your God did for you in Egypt before your eyes? Unto you it was showed, that you might know that the LORD, He is God. There is none else beside Him. Out of heaven He made you to hear His voice, that he might instruct you. And upon Earth He showed you his great fire. And you heard His words out of the midst of the fire."

Now this, of course "it is written for our admonition" as Romans 15:4 says. Moses writes this to further impress upon us all the connection between "voice," "words," and "power." So powerful is the voice of God that it's a miracle that they lived through the hearing of

it!

None of us have ever had to face anything like that, but we have to remember that this was written for us. It was written so that we could make the connection between "voice," "words," and "power."

When we think of power, we almost always think of the Holy Spirit. But Jesus said, "the words that I speak to you, they are spirit, and they are life"—and they have power. Now when God gave His spirit, He gave it accompanied by the sound of a mighty rushing wind—like a hurricane that bends and breaks things in its path, and is the same substance from which thunder is formed and created!

So we have "voice," "words," "power," and "spirit" linked in a process that will affect life. But, there is yet a link or two missing!

Hebrews 3:7-13 "Wherefore (as the Holy Spirit says, 'Today if you will hear His Voice, harden not your hearts, as in the provocation, in the day of temptation in the wilderness when your fathers tempted Me, proved Me, and saw My works for 40 years. Wherefore I was grieved with that generation, and said, 'They do always err in their heart, and they have not known my ways.' So I swore in My wrath, 'They shall not enter into My rest.') Take heed, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief, in departing from the living God. But exhort one another daily, while it is called 'Today' lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin."

We, of course, cannot literally hear the sound of His voice, but we can hear what He says and does in quite a number of ways.

A beautiful example that I think that we can all relate to is one that David used in Psalm 19 where he said that the heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament shows His handiwork. He goes on to say that each day and each night utters speech and knowledge of God, and its sound is heard throughout the world. This is a poetic way of saying that the creation "voices" the knowledge of God to us.

We sing the hymn, *God Speaks to Us* and, by His great power we're led. We hear His voice speaking to us in the written word, in the preaching of His truth by His ministers, in the events of His providence, and sometimes in our own conscience.

In each of these aspects, when His truth is involved, His word is personally speaking to

us. And He expects His children to hear—to listen with understanding—and to apply it today, RIGHT NOW, in the present! Don't put it off until tomorrow! That's the kind of attitude that He wants in His children.

Now here in Hebrews 3, this context is written in much the same sense of Psalm 19 of the creation. And even as the creation continuously witnesses for God each day across the face of the whole earth, Christ's voice speaks to His church throughout the ages wherever they happen to be. He does not want His children to put off repentance until tomorrow! How do we even know that we will be around tomorrow? We will act with alacrity if we appreciate the power. And I don't mean cringing terror, but in reverence, in appreciation of the fact that God intended us to use it—His word, His voice—to enhance and give life.

But there is still yet something else missing! Let's reread verses 12 and 13 in Hebrews 3:

Hebrews 3:12-13 "Take heed, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief, in departing from the living God. But exhort one another daily, while it is called 'Today,' lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin."

We have *voice*. We have *word*. We have *spirit*. We have *power*. We have *hearing*.

The next link is that we have to *believe* it!

The great difficulty in our mind regarding this relationship we have with God is within our will. And if there is within a person an unwillingness to listen to God's voice—an unwillingness to allow God to reign over him—an unwillingness to pay attention to his relationship with God, that person will make little or no effort to yield, or overcome. That person will create a thousand difficulties that prevent him from really engaging himself in a relationship serving God. Virtually everything will attract his eye, or ear, and distract him. He will neglect what he knows he ought to do. And his heart will gradually become insensitive—it will be hardened to the hearing of God's voice.

Now, let's turn to Hebrews 12, because before the writer of the Book of Hebrews closes, he gives what is probably the most thunderous warning in all the bible bar none! It actually begins in chapter 10, but we're only going to pick up part of it.

Hebrews 12:25-29 See that you refuse not him who speaks. For if they

escaped not who refused him that spoke on earth [he's talking about Exodus 20 and the giving of the law], much more shall not we escape if we turn away from Him who speaks from heaven. Whose voice then shook the earth, but now He has promised saying, 'Yet once more I shake not the earth only, but also heaven.' And this word, 'Yet once more...' signifies the removing of those things that are shaken, as of things that are made, that those things which cannot be shaken may remain. Wherefore we receiving a kingdom that cannot be moved, let us have grace, whereby we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear, because our God is a consuming fire.

Listen! Hear Him! Believe what He says!

The author of Hebrews has presented us with a fact that Christ is greater than angels are; that He is greater than Moses is; that He is greater than Aaron is; that the New Covenant is superior in every way to the Old Covenant. And, this is addressed to Christians who stand not before a physical mountain in the Sinai, but a spiritual mount Zion in heaven, and we still have the potential to refuse to hear, even as our ancestors who had just come out of Egypt did not hear. Now, they knew—THEY KNEW—that it was the voice of God that they heard, and they refused to hear because they believed that they could not endure what was commanded!

Do you see the parallel?

It is possible for Christians to cherish their own will, which they know to be diametrically opposed to the will and purpose of God, and to stick to their own desires, thus stifling the voice of the Almighty God Himself!

And thus, we can wrench ourselves away from the voice because we feel uncomfortable going against our resolve.

Now we need one more link.

I Corinthians 1:18-21 "For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness, but unto us who are saved, it is the power of God. For it is written, 'I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and will bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent.' Where is the wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the disputer of this world? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of this world? For after that in the wisdom of God the world by wisdom knew

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not God, it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching [the spoken word] to save them who believe."

We need a voice—a preacher—a true minister of God—to make clear the message.

By nature, our desires are likely to run amok. And we think we know what we want. But, by nature, we don't always know what we need. A minister's function within the church is to lead men from what we want, to what we need.

I saw a brief article that was excerpted from a portion of a *Fortune* magazine article, somewhat old—an unlikely place for this to be—but, it was chiding church pastors for following rather than leading their flocks. And the result, it said, was a vicious, downward spiral of spiritual disillusionment in the congregates.

This quote that I have here was taken from that article. It is really insightful:

There is only one way out of the spiral. The way out is the sound of a voice. Not our voice, but a voice coming from something not ourselves in the existence of which we cannot disbelieve. It is the earthly task of the pastors to hear this voice, to cause us to hear it, and to tell us what it says.

Romans 10:13-17 "For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved. How then shall they call on Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach, except they be sent? As it is written, 'How beautiful are the feet of them who preach the gospel of peace, and bring glad tidings of good things!' But they have not all obeyed the gospel. For Isaiah said, 'Lord, who has believed our report?' So then, faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God."

How can people call on God if they never heard of Him and do not know Him? Paul answers that they can't hear without a preacher. A preacher cannot go unless he is sent, commissioned as an ambassador with a message revealed to him. Paul's summary is that faith—saving faith—arises from this combination of acts after the message is heard and believed. Faith comes by hearing the Voice of God spoken by way of a duly ordained messenger of God. And this, in effect, means that only He who sends the message can designate who bears it!

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I might add something very important here. Paul is not simply describing the beginning of faith, rather its beginning and all of the progress made by faith. The very strength of faith is by hearing and believing.

Salvation is by grace through faith. Faith is the key that opens the door of salvation, but only to those who will hear and believe.

Zephaniah 3:1 "Woe to her who is filthy and polluted—the oppressing city!..."

He is talking here about Jerusalem. Look at the opening line of verse 2:

Zephaniah 3:2 "... She obeyed not the voice. [That's what led to Jerusalem's downfall!] She received not correction. She trusted not in the Lord. She drew not near to her God."

The Voice of God was in the prophet that He sent with a message to bring about repentance that she did not obey. And so the preacher or prophet gives sound to the Voice of God and His words. They heard the sound, but they did not believe. And so, their sin persisted.

Christian preaching is the preaching of Christ. Don't misunderstand what I just said. I didn't say, "preaching *about* Christ." I said the "preaching *of* Christ"—meaning preaching what Christ Himself preached. And, some of what Christ preached was about Himself, but it included a great deal more than that. Only when we preach what Christ preached are we able to have the faith of Christ—the faith that saves—because Christ preached what He believed. And what He believed was the message that He heard from the Father.

Galatians 2:20 "I am crucified with Christ. Nevertheless, I live. Yet not I, but Christ lives in me. And the life which I now live in the flesh, I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave Himself for me."

Under the Old Covenant, the Voice of God was His duly ordained—appointed—prophets. Under the New Covenant, He transferred that responsibility to His apostles, and to reject that message is to reject Christ and the Father. Only by accepting and believing that message can the faith of Christ be in us.

That is saving faith.

In summary, there are five things here about the voice.

One: There is *the*—definite article "**the**"—Voice of God.

Two: The Voice of God is in the creation, and it speaks of His existence.

Three: The Voice of God is in His word and it expounds in almost infinite detail the things that we need in order to be prepared for the Kingdom of God.

Four: The Voice of God was in His prophets and apostles.

Five: The Voice of God is in His ministry if they are speaking in agreement with the Voice of His word.

In some regards, our salvation pretty much hinges on our yielding to The Voice that we see in God's word. That is where our life is. "The words that I speak unto you," Jesus said, "they are spirit, and they are life." If we reject them, if we harden ourselves to them, there will be no possibility that we will have in us the faith of Christ because this book represents what Christ believed. It is His Voice.