HEARING GOD’S VOICE
SESSION ONE
GOD SPEAKS THROUGH THE HOLY SPIRIT

Hajime was offered a promotion at his company. Along with the promotion, however, he would have to transfer to another country for three years. This opportunity at work came just at the time when Hajime and his wife were becoming more involved in their small group. As a result of their small group, Hajime and Hiroko were growing spiritually. In order for Hajime and Hiroko to stay where they were, Hajime would have to quit his company and find a new job. On the other hand, if Hajime transferred overseas, there might be other new opportunities to serve God and experience spiritual growth in the other country. This was a very difficult decision for Hajime and Hiroko, so they shared about their situation with their small group and asked for prayer. Later that night, after their small group meeting, Hajime told Hiroko, “If we just knew God’s will, then we would know what we should do. I wish that God would speak to us so that we could hear His voice.”

Like Hajime, you also may be struggling to try to understand God’s will. You may be trying to make an important decision about your future, such as career or marriage. Or you may want to know more about God’s will for your everyday life.

One reason that you may have difficulty understanding God’s will is that you may not know how God speaks. If you do not know how God speaks, you will not be aware of when God is speaking to you. If you do not know how and when God is speaking to you, you will not hear His voice. When you do not hear God’s voice, you do not know what God is saying to you. It is only when you hear God speaking to you that you can know God and can understand His will. It is only when you know God and you understand His will that you can do His will.

Small Group Discussion
1. How do you know when God is speaking to you?
2. How does God speak to you?
3. Read 1 Samuel 3:1-11

When Samuel was a boy, he went to live with a priest named Eli who took care of the temple. One night while Samuel was asleep, God called out to him. The Bible says that God called Samuel three times, but Samuel did not know that God was calling him. Three times God called, and three times Samuel got up, went to Eli, and said, “You called me, and here I am.” The first two times, Eli just sent Samuel back to bed. But finally, the third time, Eli realized that God was calling Samuel. So Eli sent Samuel back to bed with these instructions: “Go and lie down, and if he calls you say, ‘Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening’” (1 Samuel 3:9).

Many people have trouble understanding God’s will. The reason they do not understand God’s will is that they do not know when God is speaking to them. They do not know when God is speaking because they do not know how God speaks. According to the Bible, God speaks to people in many different ways. In the Bible there are times when
God spoke in an audible voice that people could hear with their ears. On other occasions, God spoke to people through dreams and visions. Sometimes God sent angels to people with His message.

Small Group Discussion
Has God ever spoken to you through an audible, a dream or vision, or an angel? If so talk about your experience.

God has not changed. God can still speak to people in these ways. God can still use visions, dreams, and angels to tell people His will. God can still speak to people through an audible voice. But this is not how God usually speaks to us. God does not usually speak to us so that we can hear Him with our ears. God usually speaks so that we can hear Him with our hearts! There are six ways that God speaks to us so that we can hear Him with our hearts. God speaks to us through the Holy Spirit, the Bible, prayer, the Church, circumstances and the path of life.* 1 Corinthians 2:9-12 tells us:

“No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him—but God has revealed it to us by his Spirit. The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God. For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the man’s spirit within him? In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us.”

Your spirit is the unseen, internal part of your human nature. It includes your will, emotions, desires, thoughts, and memories. In this way, your spirit defines your character as an individual human being. It is by means of knowing yourself spiritually that you really know who you are. Since your spirit is unseen and internal, no other person really knows about your spirit. Only you and God know the real you.

When you came to believe in Jesus as your Lord and Savior, it was the result of God’s Spirit speaking to your spirit. You did not believe in Jesus only because you heard the Gospel message with your ears and understood it with your brain. It is because the Holy Spirit took this message and applied it to your heart. What first happened when you became a believer in Jesus Christ continues everyday of your Christian life. The Holy Spirit, who now lives inside of you, teaches you about the things of God. Jesus said:

“When he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. He will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and making it known to you. All that belongs to the Father is mine. That is why I said the Spirit will take from what is mind and make it known to you.” (John 15:13-15)

The Holy Spirit will always begin by pointing you to Jesus. This is because it is through Jesus that you experience God’s love, God’s grace and all of His blessings. This is not only the point where the Christian life begins. This point also must be the center and source of strength for your life as a Christian each day. So anytime you get too far
away from the truth of the Gospel, anytime you wander too far away from Jesus and begin to go your own way, the Holy Spirit will bring you back to the basis of your Christian life by speaking to you about Jesus.

Not only does the Spirit want you to know Jesus, the Spirit also wants you to experience Jesus in your own life. Another way to say this is that the Holy Spirit wants to make you as much like Jesus as possible. This is because it is God’s will for you to become like His Son Jesus in attitude, thought and action. The Bible says that spiritual maturity is being conformed to the image of Christ (Ephesians 4:13). God’s desire is that your character be changed so that it comes to resemble the character of Jesus. This Christ-like character can only come about as fruit as the Holy Spirit works in you.

“The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.” (Galatians 5:22-23)

Small Group Application
If you have an experience when God spoke to you through Holy Spirit, talk about the experience. Use the following questions as a basis for what you say.
1. What did God say to you?
2. How did you respond to what God said to you?
3. What happened as a result of your response?

Personal Application
1. Write the answers to the following questions.
   (1) What are some things that God has shown you in the past that you understand clearly to be His will? (Salvation, work, marriage, a time when God told you to do something specific and you obeyed Him)
   (2) What have you learned about God from the experience of doing His will?
   (3) Do you believe that you can trust God?
   (4) What do you need to know God’s will about now?
2. Spend some time in prayer. Thank God for His faithfulness. Thank God for how He has shown you His will in the past. Ask God speak to you through His Spirit, the Bible and prayer so that you can know His will. Finally, commit to God to do whatever He tells you to do.

*This material is based on Henry T. Blackaby and Claude King, Experiencing God (Nashville: Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1990), 72-107.
Session Two
God Speaks Through Prayer and the Bible

Small Group Discussion
1. What did God teach you through the personal application last week?
2. When you have a conversation with another person, who talks? Does one person do all of the talking? Or do both people talk and then listen, talk and then listen?

If one person does all of the talking, it is not really a conversation! The same is true with prayer. **Prayer should be a conversation with God. When you pray you should also take some time to be silent in order to allow God to speak to you.** When you listen to God, He may speak to you about many things: about something that you read in the Bible; about another person; about something that is happening in your everyday life; about something that you need to do or about someone that you need to help. God may show you a sin that you need to confess to Him or a relationship with another person that you need to make right. God may show you some way that you can serve or someone that you should talk with about Jesus.

When Jesus taught His disciples to pray, He said that they should say to God the Father, “Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:10). Whenever you pray, whatever you pray for, you should conclude by saying to your heavenly Father, “Your will be done. Your will be done in the world and in my corner of the world. Your will be done in the lives of everyone I know and, most of all, your will be done in my life. Father, show me your will and then do your will through me.”

Small Group Discussion
If you have an experience when God spoke to you through prayer, talk about the experience. Use the following questions as a basis for what you say.
1. What did God say to you?
2. How did you respond to what God said to you?
3. What happened as a result of your response?

The Bible is God’s Word. When you read the Bible or hear the Bible taught, the Holy Spirit takes the words that you read or hear and uses them to reveal God’s truth. According to 2 Timothy 3:16-17:

“All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.”

Most of what you need to know about God’s will can be found in God’s Word. If you will do what God’s Word teaches, then it will be easy to understand the other parts of God’s will. The problem comes when you want to understand God’s Word, but you do not want to do God’s Word. James 1:22-24 warns,
“Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like.”

If you merely hear the Word of God and read the Word of God, but do not do what the Word of God says, it will not accomplish anything. The Word of God only has the power to change your life when you believe it and do what it says.

For example, God’s Word teaches that you should love other people—all other people, including your enemies. Do you love your enemies? The Bible teaches that you should pray for other people. Do you pray for other people? The Bible teaches that you should tell other people about Jesus. Do you tell other people about Jesus? The Bible says that you should serve other people and meet the other needs of other people. Do you serve other people willingly and humbly, with a loving heart? The Bible says that you should hate evil and run away from evil. Do you do this, or do you try to do as many bad things as you can without getting caught?

You should try to become like Peter and John who said to the Jewish rulers, “Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God’s sight to obey you rather than God. For we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard” (Acts 4:19-20). Obeying God’s Word must become more important to you than pleasing other people. When you commit yourself to do whatever God shows you through His Word, God will make His will clear to you.

Small Group Discussion
If you have an experience when God spoke to you through the Bible, talk about the experience. Use the following questions as a basis for what you say.
1. What did God say to you?
2. How did you respond to what God said to you?
3. What happened as a result of your response?

Personal Application
James 1:22 says, “Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.” In order to do what God’s Word says, you must first understand what it says. Read Hebrews 4:12-13 and answer the following questions. Be prepared to share with your small group about what God teaches you through this study.
1. Questions about the spiritual significance of Hebrews 4:12-13:
   - What does this passage say about God?
   - What does this passage say about human beings?
   - What does this passage say about the relationship between God and human beings?
2. Questions about the practical application of Hebrews 4:12-13:
   - Is there a sin for me to avoid?
   - Is there a sin for me to turn away from?
   - Is there a promise for me to claim?
Is there a *praise* to give?
Is there a *prayer* to pray?
Is there an *example* for me to follow?
Is there a *command* for me to obey?

You can learn more about how God speaks to us through the Bible in the *Basic Bible Study* and *Bible Character Studies* Toolbox units.
SESSION THREE
GOD SPEAKS THROUGH THE CHURCH AND CIRCUMSTANCES

Small Group Discussion
What did God teach you through the personal application last week?

One Sunday morning a young school teacher was startled when another church member stood up, pointed his finger at him, and said, “God has called you to preach!” Until this time, the school teacher had never considered the issue of God’s plan for his life. But God spoke to him through the words of another church member. The teacher soon entered seminary to study to become a pastor. He went on to become the pastor of a large church and one of the most influential Christian leaders of the twentieth century.

God speaks through the Church. God uses Christians to teach each other, to encourage each other, and to help each other grow spiritually in order that each person can understand and fulfill God’s plan for his or her life. Ephesians 4:11-13 tells us,

“It was he (Jesus) who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.”

God prepares and calls out people to help His Church to grow in faith and in the knowledge of Jesus. God speaks through these people to help every person in the Church to understand and do God’s will. As a result of doing God’s will, the whole Church grows to spiritual maturity. The measurement for this spiritual maturity is Christ-likeness. The more like Jesus you become, the more spiritual mature that you are. You cannot become more like Jesus by only reading your Bible and praying. Spiritual maturity comes about as you participate in the life of the Church and learn from other people that God has placed there to give you guidance and encouragement.

Many times you will be certain that the words of advice or encouragement that another Christian has shared with you have come from God, and God is speaking to you through that person. But no human being is perfect. Even someone in a position of spiritual influence, such as a pastor, Bible teacher, or small group leader, may sometimes give advice that is not in accordance with God’s will. How can you know whether or not the words you hear from another Christian are really from God or not? You should do four things:

(1) Pray, asking God to confirm whether or not the words that you have heard are really God’s will.
(2) Read your Bible, seeking to understand God’s will. God is consistent. He will never tell you to do anything through another person that is inconsistent with what God teaches in His Word.
(3) **Talk to other wise and experienced Christians.** When you are uncertain about something, it is good to get counsel and guidance from more than one person. When you do this, make certain that those you talk to are spiritually mature. It does little good to ask a person for advice about God’s will if he or she is not trying to live their own life in accordance with God’s will.

(4) **Follow the guidance of the Holy Spirit.** Jesus promises that the Holy Spirit “will guide you into all truth” (John 16:13).

**Small Group Discussion**
If you have an experience when God spoke to you through another Christian, talk about the experience. Use the following questions as a basis for what you say.
1. What did God say to you?
2. How did you respond to what God said to you?
3. What happened as a result of your response?

What if you have the dream of becoming a great singer? So you go to every talent agency in Tokyo to audition, but after each audition you always receive the same answer, “Thank you very much for your audition. Don’t worry about contacting us. If the opportunity comes for someone with you ‘talent,’ we will call you.” This is really a polite way of saying, “You have no future as a professional singer.” If that is your circumstance, God may be saying, “It is not my plan for you to become a professional singer.” Or God may be saying, “It is not my plan for you to become a professional singer now. Be patient and wait for me to provide the opportunity at the right time. I will give you the opportunity to use that talent for me later.”

God is the Creator and Lord of the universe. As a result, God is able to speak to you through what He is doing in the world around you. God can show you His will through the opportunities that He gives to you. God can also show you His will through the limitations that He places upon you.

Another unit in the Toolbox, *Prepared by God to Serve*, is designed to help you understand God’s plan for your life by looking at who you are and what you should do. This will enable you to carry out your unique role in your church and small group. In this way, you can help yourself and other people to grow spiritually. In order to accomplish this, *Prepared by God to Serve* includes five sessions that each focus on one aspect of your uniqueness as a person and as a believer in Jesus.

(1) **Spiritual Gifts**—These are special gifts which the Holy Spirit provides to believers for the purpose of participation in the church. These gifts are meant to be used for the benefit of everyone.

(2) **Heart**—This refers to your passions and desires which motivate your actions. God has given you the desires in order to point you towards an area of service that He wants you to do that will be right for you.

(3) **Abilities**—This refers to your natural talents. Every human being, whether Christian or non-Christian, has natural talents and abilities. As a Christian, you should realize that
your abilities have been given to you by Jesus in order to serve Him and other people. They are to be used in order to express your love.

(4) Personality—God made you with a unique personality. Your personality determines how you will want to express your passion. Your personality determines in what role you will be comfortable using your spiritual gifts and talents.

(5) Experience—God has allowed you to have your experiences in order to prepare for the service that He wants you to do. What you are experiencing now will prepare you for what God wants you to do later.*

Small Group Discussion
If you have an experience when God spoke to you through a circumstance, talk about the experience. Use the following questions as a basis for what you say.
1. What did God say to you?
2. How did you respond to what God said to you?
3. What happened as a result of your response?

Personal Application
1. Ask God to give you a clear understanding of your abilities.
2. Answer the following two questions:
   (1) What are some things that you do well?
   (2) By each of the things that you wrote for number one, write one or two ways that you could use this ability to serve God and/or other people?
3. Be prepared to share what you learned with your small group.

*The concept of “S-H-A-P-E” is taken from the writings of Rick Warren and the model used at Saddleback Church in Lake Forest, California. See, for example, Warren’s books, *The Purpose Driven Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 369-75; *The Purpose Driven Life* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 241-56.
Small Group Discussion
What did God teach you through the personal application last week?

Proverbs 3:5-6 tells us,

“Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight.”

This verse says that you must be careful not to rely on your own limited understanding as a human being. Instead, you must trust God and decide to follow His plan for your life. If you will listen to God, God will guide your life so that each step leads naturally to the next step. As you serve God, He will continue to lead your life in a direction. He will make the road of your life smooth. Your life will be like climbing a stairway, so that one step leads to the next step, and that step then leads to the next one, and so on. When you look ahead it may be difficult to see how the steps of your life fit together or where God is leading you. It is only when you look back that you will be able to see clearly how God has guided every step of your life. In Jeremiah 29:11-13 God tells us,

“For I know the plans I have for you; plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.”

The Bible says that if you are Christian, God is your Lord. In other words, God is your King, your Ruler, and your Boss. God is in control. God will do whatever seems best to Him. The good news is, whatever seems best to God really is the best! God’s plan for your life is the best. It is a much better plan than you could think of yourself. In order to know God’s plan, you must seek to know Him. You must pray to God, and try to hear His voice. God has promised, “You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.”

When you seek God and listen to His voice He will speak to you. God will speak to you through the Holy Spirit, the Bible and prayer. God will also speak to you through the Church, your circumstances, and the path of life. When God speaks to you, you should respond to His voice in four ways.

1. Trust God. God has given you this promise: “Be strong and courageous. Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go” (Joshua 1:9). He will always be with you to guide and encourage you. God will give you strength and courage to face every difficulty in your life. Trust in God’s perfect plan for your life.
2. **Obey God.** God allows you to have the freedom to choose whether or not you will obey His will. If you choose to obey God’s voice and do what He says, God will bless you. But if you choose to disobey God and follow your own desires, the results will be destructive. This is because human plans, no matter how good they may appear to be, are always self-centered. Human plans focus on what is good for the person who is making the plan. But as the person strives to achieve his or her own happiness and success, the final result is unhappiness and discouragement. This is because human beings can never achieve a sense of fulfillment on our own. **You must choose to receive life and God’s blessings by choosing to obey God when you hear His voice.**

3. **Walk with God in faithfulness.** God’s blessings may not come at the time and manner that you expect. God does not promise to give you everything that you want. God does not promise riches such as money and possessions. God does not promise fame. God does not promise that you will have no difficulties. But God is faithful. God will keep His promises. God will bless you. God does promise to always be with you. God does promise to care for all of your needs. God does promise to guide you and help you because He has a plan and purpose for your life.

God is faithful. God wants to walk with you, to guide you and to give you His blessings. If you will choose to walk faithfully with God each day, He will guide your steps. In order to do this, you must choose to obey God each time that you hear His voice. This is what Jesus means when He says, “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me” (Luke 9:23). In order to obey God, you must deny yourself. You must say “no” to your own will and your own desires so that you can say “yes” to God.

4. **You must be willing to change.** When you listen to God’s voice and do His will, you will not remain the same as you are now. God will change you. You should not fear this change. Any change that God brings in your life will result in you becoming a better person. God will change you from the inside out, changing your thoughts, desires, and motives so that they will become like the thoughts, desires, and motives of Jesus. God will make you into a new person. According to 2 Corinthians 5:17, “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!” When God speaks to you, trust God, obey Him, and walk with Him faithfully. Then God will recreate you in the image of Jesus and fulfill His wonderful plan for your life.

Small Group Discussion
Share one experience of how God has spoken to you during while studying the Hearing God’s Voice unit. Use the following questions as a basis for what you say.

1. What did God say to you?
2. How did you respond to what God said to you?
3. What happened as a result of your response?

**Personal Application**
1. Pray, asking God to speak to you in a way that you can understand His will clearly. Also, pray that God will give you the courage and strength to obey His will.
2. Reflect on how God has led you in the past and may be speaking to you now using the worksheet on the following page.
3. Talk with one or two trusted Christian friends about how God has led you in the past and may be leading you now. Ask the person’s comments on what you understand about what God is saying to you. Be willing to correct your thinking, based on the advice of others, the Bible, and the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Reflection
1. What have you learned about how God speaks?
2. What questions do you still have about how God speaks?
3. What is your specific plan to share what you have learned about how God speaks with another person?
HEARING GOD'S VOICE WORKSHEET

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