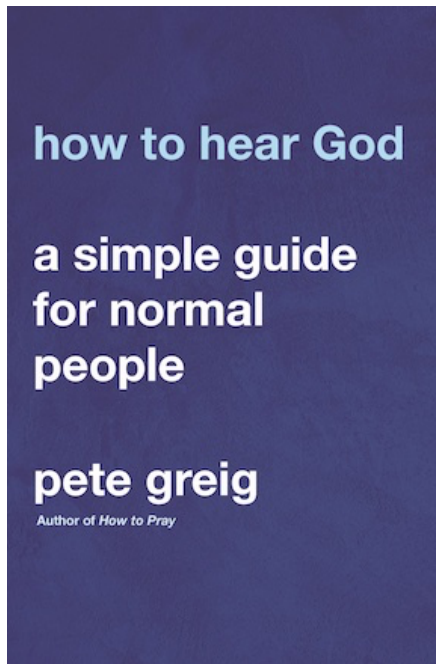


Q&A with Pete Greig

How To Hear God: A Simple Guide for Normal People



Q: What's the importance of learning to hear the voice of God?

A: Learning to hear God's voice—His word and His whisper—is the single most important thing you will ever learn to do. I'm not exaggerating. Hearing God is not peripheral; it is integral to human history. Neither is it an optional extra for wild-eyed mystics and those who happen to be spiritually inclined. Hearing God is essential to the very purpose for which you and I were made. Without it everything falls apart. But when we learn to love God's Word—to listen and obey—everything aligns.

In fact, the Bible says that your primary purpose—the reason for which you were born—is to enjoy a real, conversational relationship with an infinitely loving divinity, which is why you almost certainly hear him already, more than you realize. Your Father in heaven invites you to walk with him in a relaxed daily conversation as Adam and Eve did in the glades of Eden (Gen. 3:8). He wants to talk with you intimately as He did with Moses, “face to face, as one speaks to a friend” (Ex. 33:11). Occasionally He will communicate thrillingly through dreams, visions, and audible voices, as He did with the apostle Peter on the rooftop in Joppa (Acts 10:9–19). But mostly He will speak quietly in “a still

small voice” as He did with Elijah on Mount Carmel (1 Kings 19:12 NKJV), sounding surprisingly ordinary as He did when the boy Samuel confused His voice for that of the old man in the room next door (1 Sam. 3). Again and again the Lord will join you on your journey through life, stirring your soul and speaking through the Scriptures.

Q: How does this new book aim to help people hear God?

A: This is a simple book for normal people about how to plug in and hear the voice of God more clearly amid the clatter and clamor of daily life. It is, in other words, a simple guide to one of the most astounding yet confusing things you will ever learn to do. Astounding because, well, what could be more amazing? But it's confusing too because God does not for the most part speak audibly, the way we speak, and this means that we can easily misunderstand, misinterpret, or miss out altogether on what He is saying. The problem is generally not that God isn't communicating, and neither is it normally that we lack the capacity to hear. Rather, it's that we easily get disconnected, distracted, and distanced from the intimate and immediate connection we were created to enjoy. It's a disconnection that comes, as the Anglican Service of Communion puts it, “through negligence, through weakness, and through our own deliberate fault.”

Q: In what ways does the story of Jesus appearing to the couple on the road to Emmaus in Luke 24 provide a great model for prayer?

A: Here we find the covert Christ joining us on our journey through life. And here we are reminded that we must proactively invite him into our questions, our relationships, and our homes. Here our hearts catch fire and the Scriptures come alive. Here He walks and talks with us, patiently answering our questions, realigning our thinking, and teaching us to pray. Here at the table we share the bread and the wine, remembering His death and recognizing the reality of His resurrection right before our eyes. And here we are propelled out into the darkness as witnesses to the wonders we've seen. Somehow these few verses distill more insight into how God speaks, and how we are to hear him speak, than any other passage, anywhere else in the Gospels. In fewer than twenty verses, the Lord communicates in at least five different ways: conversationally “as they talked and discussed these things with each other”; exegetically when he explained “all the Scriptures concerning himself”; sacramentally when He “took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them”; prophetically when “their eyes were opened”; and inwardly

when He spoke directly to their hearts, which were “burning...while He talked.” For every person who encounters Christ dramatically on the Damascus road with blinding lights and a booming voice, hundreds more meet him slowly and quietly, incognito on the Emmaus road, through friendship, Scripture, and conversation.

Q: So meeting Jesus is the starting point for hearing God?

A: Absolutely. We understand the Bible in the light of Christ and not the other way round. Every other way in which God communicates—and in which we may therefore hear him speak—comes through Jesus and points back to him too. Nothing can replace, and nothing matters more, than a personal encounter with Jesus. “It is Christ himself, not the Bible, who is the true word of God,” wrote C. S. Lewis. “The Bible, read in the right spirit and with the guidance of good teachers, will bring us to him.”

Q: But does viewing Christ as the preeminent Word of God detract from the authority of the Bible as God’s Word?

A: Nothing could be further from the truth! The Bible is the primary means by which we become familiar with both the purposes and the personality of its subject, Jesus Christ. And here in the Emmaus road story, we have a dynamic picture of the dance between God’s Word in the Bible and His final Word in Jesus. Each one points to the other. Our subjective personal encounters with Jesus are counterbalanced by our more objective examination of His Word in the Bible. One without the other simply doesn’t work. Hearing God begins with Jesus and leads us immediately to Scripture, which, in turn, points us back to Christ. Personally, I’m not particularly interested in becoming more devout or more informed or even better at hearing God. I aspire to discern His voice only insofar as it brings me closer to Jesus. My passion is still, in the words of Paul, “to know Christ” (Phil. 3:10).

Q: What are some barriers to people hearing from God?

A: Growing up, I never really learned to hear the Lord for myself, not as a natural part of a living relationship. Looking back now, I think I had unwittingly developed three fundamental problems with the very notion of God speaking to me either supernaturally or in any consistently conversational way: psychological, theological, and experiential. Psychologically, I felt unworthy of any kind of special attention from God, and my experiences backed this up. When I prayed for a miracle, it never seemed to work; when I read my Bible, it often seemed irrelevant; and when I needed God to speak dramatically, there was never an audible voice or an angelic visitation or a supernatural dream. I didn’t feel spiritual or special enough to hear God in the ways people do in the Bible. Theologically, I had absorbed some of the prejudices of dispensationalism, although I would never have known what that term meant. This is the idea that we should no longer expect God to speak and act miraculously today in the ways he once did in the Bible because that sort of thing died the day the ink dried on the New Testament. One of the many problems with this view is that it disregards the fact that people can, and do, misunderstand and misapply the Bible just as much as any other means of divine communication. It also ignores that the Bible itself teaches that God speaks outside the Bible! Experientially, I was unfamiliar with the voice of God. Apart from the Bible, I only really expected him to communicate through my conscience (which seemed basically to be God saying no a lot) and through something we referred to as “having peace.” The idea here was that when you made a good decision, you would be flooded with a sense of well-being, but when you made a bad one, you would lose that peace altogether. For me this was never a good test. Peace is a pretty subjective means of making important decisions, especially if you’re as uptight as I am.

Q: What’s the importance of understanding these common barriers?

A: This matters because we often confuse theology with psychology. The fact that God speaks is a matter of theology. It’s about God’s nature. But how we hear God speak is a matter not of theology but of psychology. It’s about how our neural pathways have learned to receive and process data, which varies from person to person. One individual may indeed be flooded with feelings of peace when they propose to their girlfriend, while another may be utterly terrified. This probably says more about the way that person is wired than it does about the will of God for their lives. Many people struggle to hear God because they have been taught to listen for His voice in ways that are difficult or even impossible for them to process.

Q: Why didn't Jesus just announce His presence on the road to Emmaus—wouldn't that have sufficed?

A: When it comes to hearing God, the Bible is the very language of His heart. Nothing He says in any other way or in any other context will ever override, undermine, or contradict what He has already said in the Scriptures. I suppose this is why Jesus doesn't just show up on the road to Emmaus and say, "Hi, it's me!" Instead, He takes considerable time to conduct an exhaustive biblical exposition that carefully contextualizes His own life, death, and resurrection within the canon of its orthodoxy. What an incredible Bible study that must have been! How amazing to have listened as Jesus personally unpacked "what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself." No wonder the couple said to each other a little later, "Were not our hearts burning within us while He...opened the Scriptures to us?"

Q: What truths does Christ's commitment to biblical exposition on the road to Emmaus reveal?

A: First, it shows that the resurrected Jesus continues to look to the Bible for authority. A brand-new world may have been inaugurated by His death and resurrection, but the Bible is still the means by which Jesus knows what He knows. Perhaps this seems strange to us today. Notions of absolute truth and ultimate authority are fiercely attacked, and the Bible itself is no longer accorded unconditional respect in Western societies. Even within some wings of the church, the authority of the Bible is being undermined. No wonder so many people are losing their confidence in Scripture. Second, on the road to Emmaus Jesus interprets the Scriptures in a radical new way, explaining "what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself" (v. 27). In other words, He took the lens of His own life, death, and resurrection and reviewed the entire Bible through its unique perspective. This Jesus-shaped approach to understanding the Bible is such an important key to Hearing His voice. Third, in this story we see that when the Bible is interpreted in this way—in the light of Jesus, inspired by the Holy Spirit—it has a remarkable power to speak directly and personally into our lives. Like the couple on the Emmaus road, we will sometimes find "our hearts burning within us" as the Lord reveals himself to us through the Bible.

Q: What is the Scriptural role of prophecy?

A: Prophecy shifts the focus to hearing God's voice for other people. The apostle Paul describes it like this: "The one who prophesies speaks to people for their strengthening, encouraging and comfort ... The one who prophesies edifies the church" (1 Cor. 14:3–4). It couldn't be clearer: by way of prophecy, God speaks through us into the lives of others. So the primary focus of prophecy is others, and the primary purpose of prophecy is their strengthening, encouraging, comfort, and edification. In other words, it is not, as is often supposed, a way of exposing, criticizing, or pulling people down, and it's only rarely a way of pronouncing judgment. Neither is it primarily about predicting the future. In both Old and New Testaments, prophecy is predominantly a means of declaring God's will and powerfully communicating His heart.

Q: Do you believe God is constantly speaking, and we only need to learn to listen?

A: God does not speak indiscriminately like a relentless radio station. The atmosphere around us is not abuzz with His continual chatter, accessible to anyone who happens to tune in. God's specific words tend to be targeted and seasonal. Of course, His logos word (in Christ and in Scripture) remains consistently and wonderfully available, but there are times in all our lives—as there were in Bible times—when God's *rhēma* word is rare. Perhaps this is because He is simply not in a hurry. But also because our Creator understands that we are seasonal beings, living in a seasonal world, and we don't thrive and mature in a mode of continual harvest. Just as a farmer knows when to sow, when to wait, and when to harvest, so God waits for the seeds of prophetic revelation to bear fruit in our lives. He may also withdraw for a while when there is particular sin in the land or if He is awaiting our obedience to an earlier word. Mature disciples learn not just to celebrate the seasons of abundant revelation but also to wait patiently and watch diligently during the in-between seasons when "the word of the Lord rare" (1 Sam. 3:1).

Q: How would you encourage a person to develop their prophetic muscles?

A: Those who work hard at developing their prophetic muscles, the way an athlete might train at the gym, will inevitably grow like Samuel in spiritual stature and strength. We do this by walking closely with Jesus from day to day. We do it by acquainting ourselves with the sound of His voice through the quiet discipline of prayerful attentiveness toward His presence. We do it by finding our own Eli to encourage and coach us in hearing God's voice. We do it too by welcoming feedback and learning from our mistakes. We also

exercise the prophetic by diligently delivering the things God gives us to say with increasing levels of confidence, competence, and consistency.

Q: How often is God speaking directly to us?

A: It's entirely possible—indeed, it's entirely probable—that God already speaks to you more than you realize. This is why you need ears to hear him and the Spirit's help in discerning His voice amid all the other noise of life. As Ken Helsler said, "In everything God has a voice." Our task, therefore, is to keep asking in every situation, "Where are you at work here?" And, "What are you saying in this situation?" Our attentiveness to God's voice in this way, and our willingness to obey, can determine destinies. We can't recognize Jesus by ourselves. We need the help of the Holy Spirit. Hearing God, then, is not just a technique that you perfect but a grace that you receive. The things taught in this book will only be useful if the Spirit of God takes them and causes your heart "to burn within." If information is to become revelation, and cognition about Christ is to become recognition of Christ, you will need something supernatural to take place so that the Lord gives you eyes to perceive, ears to receive, and a heart to believe what He is saying.

Q: What is the value to learning to listen to our conscience?

A: While God's word in Scripture may be considered to exist objectively, "out there," the unconscious mind (often described as the heart in Scripture) is the subjective domain of the human soul, so often neglected, rejected, and despised. But the great heroes of our faith are, without exception, those who attended first and foremost to the inner world of their own souls. They viewed the world itself as "the Vale of Soul-making," to use Keats' lovely phrase. These people undoubtedly did extraordinary things—they taught with great wisdom, fought great injustices, built schools, hospitals, and cities—but their priority was always to nurture and adorn that secret place within themselves in which they walked and talked with God. This is a beautiful journey of increasing intimacy which we may all undertake. It leads from hearing God speak externally through His word in Christ, in Scripture, and in the prophetic (vox externa— part 1), to hearing God's whisper within, through our dreams, consciences, and imagination (vox interna—part 2). And it is here, in this way, that we slowly make the great discovery: "There is hardly ever a complete silence in our soul. God is whispering to us well-nigh incessantly. Whenever the sounds of the world die out in the soul, or sink low, then we hear these whisperings of God." —Frederick William Faber (1814–1863)

Q: But is the conscience reliable to discern God's truth?

A: Because the conscience is influenced to such an extent by its social and moral context, it is not entirely reliable. "My conscience is clear," concedes Paul, "but that does not make me innocent" (1 Cor. 4:4). God certainly speaks through our consciences, but our consciences are not the same thing as the voice of God. They are not infallible. Sometimes we may feel guilty about things that simply aren't wrong, especially if we've grown up in a particularly repressive environment. Someone whose background has been extremely frugal, for instance, might feel guilty about spending even a small amount of money on themselves. Occasionally, we may continue to experience a crippling sense of shame regarding past sins, even when we've been fully forgiven. It's important to resist such false feelings of guilt and to stand instead on God's promise that "there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 8:1). And as you keep putting your trust in the facts of God's Word instead of the feelings of condemnation, your conscience will eventually realign itself with truth.

Q: Should we expect to hear God's voice in the culture even beyond the walls of the church?

A: Since we know that God speaks in all things and about all things we should certainly expect to hear His voice in the culture far beyond the walls of the church. And in many ways, this is the greatest discovery of them all, the culmination and conflagration of everything else we have explored in this book: that the Maker of all things has not abandoned His Great Project. The Creator is still creating the cosmos and the cultures in which we live. He is still actively at work within His world, speaking brilliant new things into existence (babies and films, galaxies and songs). There is no aspect of God's creation through which He cannot and does not speak. We open our Bibles and, lo, He speaks! We still ourselves for a few moments, and there He is again! We open our newspapers and find him still speaking if our ears remain open to hear. We arrive at work and He deliberately, playfully whispers a little word to our souls through that colleague who doesn't yet know He exists. Our eyes linger a little too long on the shape of a stranger

and the Lord speaks sharply through our conscience. We watch a film and it moves us to pray. We switch on the radio and He speaks through a song. Looking up at the sky as the stars come out, we strongly sense an ancient truth. This is the aim of this whole book: that we become so familiar with the word of God in its most obvious forms—in Scripture, in prophecy, in dreams, and in soul friendships—that we are enabled to hear God speak in all the earth through people and things that are not in any way consciously Christian.

Q: After exploring the many different ways in which the Lord speaks— through the Bible and prophecy, through dreams, conscience, community, creation, and culture—how do you land on Jesus Christ being the ultimate word of God?

A: It is Jesus who comes to us covertly, disguised in the ordinary, interrupting our conversations on the Emmaus road. It is His presence that realigns our thinking, His insights that bring the Scriptures to life. He enters our homes before we've had a chance to tidy them, sits down at our meal tables, half uninvited, and breaks our hearts by breaking bread. Sometimes He speaks dramatically, but mostly quietly with "words...full of the Spirit and life" (John 6:63). The more we say yes to the things He says, the more familiar and precious His voice becomes, until, ultimately, at the end of the road, at the end of the day, at the end of our lives, we look back with a mixture of wonder and joy and say: "Were not our hearts burning within us while He talked?"

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