

# Listening to the Holy Spirit

*Wait for it...*

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I'm sure many of you are aware that this service is actually simulcasted the next hour across the street at the Well, and the reason I bring that to your attention is we're about to do a little exercise that requires a little response and so whether you're in this place at this hour or at the Well at 11 o'clock, let me encourage you to respond whatever environment you are in. We just sang the lyrics that said this, "All authority and every victory is yours." I'm going to ask you: what does the word "all" mean? All. What does the word "every" mean? Every. It's not difficult. You don't even have to go and look it up in the dictionary, that means without exception all authority, every victory is his. We don't have to debate it, we don't have to discuss it, we don't have to form a conference to see what it looks like, it's all authority and it's every victory is his.

With that being said, are you having some issues, struggles, difficulties in life? We're about to open up the word of God and all your stuff and every situation, he's got this. Not, "Well, he seems to handle theirs but never mine." Or, "I've seen him handle this situation but not that one." All authority and every victory is his and for those of you who are questioning, "Well, those are the lyrics to a song," in the Gospel of Matthew 28, Jesus is about to ascend and here's what he tells the disciples, "All authority on heaven and earth is mine." Those aren't the lyrics to a song, those are the words from Jesus' mouth.

Let's pray.

*Lord, as we come to this time where we open your word, we study your word, we hear from your word, help our unbelief. Help us to believe that all of the struggles and every situation, that you're beyond capable of addressing. Lord, we believe and we know you're going to speak. Please, O God, at this time as we read your word and study it, give us ears to hear. It is in the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.*

This morning I want to encourage you to open your Bibles to the book of Acts 9. Now we're going to spend the majority of our time today in Acts 9 but at the very end of the message, we're going to go back into the Old Testament to the book of Isaiah 30 so you may want to turn there in advance if you're one of those who likes to read along, but Acts 9 and Isaiah 30. If you're a guest or visitor with us this week, one of the things that we've been doing in this summer season is we've been walking through the New Testament,

particularly the book of Acts, and we've been studying who is the person of the Holy Spirit, what is the role, how does he function in our lives. We've talked about the gifts of the Spirit. We've talked about being filled with the Spirit. We've been warned not to quench the Spirit or grieve the Spirit. But today as we come to Acts 9, we come to one of the most practical lessons into understanding the Holy Spirit and how he operates in our life. We're going to talk about what does it look like to listen to or to hear the Holy Spirit in our life.

Now in just a moment, we're going to read somewhat of a long passage from Acts 9 but it's a passage of three incidences. We have the conversion of Saul, whom we know as the Apostle Paul. We have the calling of Ananias in his life. Then we have a group of individuals who are going to be seated as Paul, whom we used to know as Saul, is teaching. Three different situations, three different scenarios, three different ways of which the Lord speaks to them but one commonality: every single audience whether it was on the road to Damascus or "sitting in the pew," all responded the same way, they all followed in obedience.

So today as we study what does it look like to listen to the Holy Spirit, no matter what the form, no matter what the manner, no matter what the volume is of which he speaks to us, the result never changes. We've heard the Holy Spirit in our lives when we do what the Lord asks us to do in life.

The book of Acts 9, beginning in verse 1. It says,

1 And Saul, yet breathing out threatenings and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord, went unto the high priest, 2 And desired of him letters to Damascus to the synagogues, that if he found any of this way, whether they were men or women, he might bring them bound unto Jerusalem. 3 And as he journeyed, he came near Damascus: and suddenly there shined round about him a light from heaven: 4 And he fell to the earth, and heard a voice saying unto him, Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? 5 And he said, Who are you, Lord? And the Lord said, I am Jesus whom thou persecutest: it is hard for thee to kick against the pricks. 6 And he trembling and astonished said, Lord, what will you have me to do? And the Lord said unto him, Arise, and go into the city, and it shall be told thee what thou must do. 7 And the men which journeyed with him stood speechless, hearing a voice, but seeing no man. 8 And Saul arose from the earth; and when his eyes were opened, he saw no man: but they led him by the hand, and brought him into Damascus. 9 And he was three days without sight, and neither did eat nor drink. 10 And there was a certain disciple at Damascus, named Ananias; and to him said the Lord in a vision, Ananias. And he said, Behold, I am here, Lord. 11 And the Lord said unto him, Arise, and go into the street which is called Straight, and enquire in the house of Judas for one called Saul, of Tarsus: for, behold, he prayeth, 12 And hath seen in a vision a man named Ananias coming in, and putting his hand on him, that he might receive his sight. 13 Then

Ananias answered, Lord, I have heard by many of this man, how much evil he hath done to thy saints at Jerusalem: 14 And here he hath authority from the chief priests to bind all that call on thy name. 15 But the Lord said unto him, Go thy way: for he is a chosen vessel unto me, to bear my name before the Gentiles, and kings, and the children of Israel: 16 For I will shew him how great things he must suffer for my name's sake. 17 And Ananias went his way, and entered into the house; and putting his hands on him said, Brother Saul, the Lord, even Jesus, that appeared unto you in the way as you came, hath sent me, that thou mightest receive thy sight, and be filled with the Holy Ghost. 18 And immediately there fell from his eyes as it had been scales: and he received sight forthwith, and arose, and was baptized. 19 And when he had received meat, he was strengthened. Then was Saul certain days with the disciples which were at Damascus. 20 And straightway he preached Christ in the synagogues, that he is the Son of God. 21 But all that heard him were amazed, and said; Is not this he that destroyed them which called on this name in Jerusalem, and came hither for that intent, that he might bring them bound unto the chief priests? 22 But Saul increased the more in strength, and confounded the Jews which dwelt at Damascus, proving that this is very Christ. 23 And after that many days were fulfilled, the Jews took counsel to kill him: 24 But their laying await was known of Saul. And they watched the gates day and night to kill him. 25 Then the disciples took him by night, and let him down by the wall in a basket.

As I mentioned, you've got three distinct stories here. You have a man on the road to Damascus, you have a man by the name of Ananias just going about his daily life, and then you have a group of individuals in what you and I might call a church setting. Three different ways in which they heard from the Lord, specifically the Holy Spirit, but they all followed in like manner, they all obeyed and did what the Lord spoke to them. Today as we look at these three stories in brief, I want to break them up by giving us a visual or an illustration of how the Holy Spirit speaks into our life and how we hear from him. I'm going to break it into these sections: waiting for lightning, listening for thunder, or the quiet whisper in your ear. That's how we see these stories break down in Acts 9.

Let's begin with waiting for lightning. Let's begin with looking for lightning in our lives. Can we all just agree that the road to Damascus was an incredible experience in Scripture yet we don't find anybody else with this experience. It's very distinct. Peter didn't have this experience. John didn't have this experience. The thousands who came to know the Lord in the book of Acts didn't have this experience. But Saul's on the road to Damascus and he has this lightning experience, this incredible, it changes everything out of heaven, you cannot mistake it experience, so much so that even those around him, they heard the noise but they did not hear the voice.

The distinctiveness of the story of Saul is this: that the Lord does speak in the manner of which he did on the road to Damascus, it does occur, it does happen, but it is an extremely rare occurrence. You don't see it anywhere else in the New Testament. In fact,

as you study the last 2,000 years of the church of Jesus Christ, you are hard-pressed to find any stories similar to this. But there was one such and the year 1505. There was a young man studying to be an attorney, studying to be a lawyer. His dad was proud, his mom was thrilled at the fact, the problem was he was stirred in his spirit. He was struggling with the desires of his flesh versus the need of his spirit.

One day he was on his way back from school, on his way home. In those days, obviously he was traveling by way of foot. He was crossing a field when a thunderstorm, much like we experienced last night, came up all of a sudden and a lightning bolt shot, hit the ground, threw him across the field. In that moment, he cried out to heaven that if he heard God and he would follow him. The identity, the name of that young man: Martin Luther, the man who 12 years later would go to the door in Wittenberg, Germany and tack up those famous 95 theses and say ??.

I don't have a Damascus road experience, in fact, I've never had anything of that nature occur in my life. It's very distinctive but God uses it. Here's the danger of looking for lightning: if we are walking through this life saying, "God, until you open the heavens, until you suspend the laws of physics, and until it's so clear that everybody around can see it as well," there is a possibility that you will never hear from God because you're so busy waiting for lightning to strike in your life. You see, there's the danger. Oh, it does happen but it's rare and you and I need to realize that the Apostle Paul has an amazing story but it's his story and it's a rare story.

The second story that takes place is with a man by the name of Ananias. It begins in verse 10. This is where it becomes a little more common and a little more frequent in our lives. I've entitled it listening for thunder. Why? Because not only does he hear from the Lord but according to verse 10 it says he has a vision of the Lord. Now when you speak of the Bible giving visions to people, it's more frequent than the "lightning" but it's not an everyday experience. It's still distinctive, though.

In the next chapter, chapter 10, we have a man by the name of Peter. Peter has been raised Jewish, he lived in the synagogue most of his life, he preached the message, but in Acts 10 the Lord is going to come to him in a vision, there's going to be sheet tied with four knots, one on each corner, all of the "unclean" animals are going to be presented before him and the Lord says, "Rise and eat." Peter debates with him about the Levitical laws and the Lord shows him that the Gospel of Jesus Christ, salvation from our sin through Jesus Christ is available not exclusively to the Jews but to whomever calls out his name, including the dirty, filthy, stinking, eating pork, barbecue Gentiles like us. All of them. He had a vision.

Back in Acts 2, this same Peter when the disciples began to speak and to hear at the Pentecost experience, those who would not believe claimed that they had become drunk early in the day. He said, "No, no, no, this is what the prophet Joel spoke." He said, "In the latter days the old men will dream dreams and the young men will have visions." Let me tell you what it looks like in Scripture when it says they had a vision, whether it's Ananias in chapter 9 or Peter in chapter 10, is you have an individual who's headed one

direction, they're going down one path, they see things one way and all of a sudden the Lord hits them over the head with a spiritual 2 x 4 and says, "Hey, buddy, it's not the way you see it." Or, "It's not the direction you need to go. You're on Plan A, I need you on Plan B." The distinctiveness of listening for thunder is that it occurs in our life randomly and sporadically but not daily.

Now I'm going to be transparent today, based on Acts 9, I've never had a lightning experience. I haven't had the heavens open up, voices come out, people falling down on the ground around me. But I have had a few thunder experiences. When I say a few, I mean less than five or six. There are those moments in life where you think you've got everything figured out, you think you're headed the right direction, and all of a sudden out of nowhere God shows up and says, "Hey, I need you here." Do you think that Ananias woke up that morning in Acts 9 and said, "Do you know what, God? I've got a really good idea. There's a guy out there trying to kill all of us, I would love to give him a bear hug. What do you think about it?" No. He woke up trying to stay away from him and all of a sudden the Lord says, "Go to him." You see, when it comes to the thunder moments in life, it's not what we have planned, it's not what we expected, it's not what we had desired in the flesh, but it's what the Lord had called us to do and be.

One of the first thunder moments in my life was the summer after my freshman year in high school and you know when you're between your freshman and sophomore year in high school, you think you've got the world all figured out, you think you know all the answers. That year I found myself at what we call student camp, much like our young people went to a few weeks ago. I was at Fort Lewis College in Durango, Colorado and I can remember it like yesterday. Nobody else heard it, nobody else saw it, but I did. I don't know what was being preached, I don't know what songs we sang, but I was on about the fourth row back mid-center, in the middle of the message and all of a sudden here's what God did, he said, "Hey, Jeff. Do you see that guy up on stage?" Now this is a conversation I'm having with the Lord but not out loud. I'm like, "Uh-huh." He says, "That's you one day." I said no, because that wasn't my plan. Being here in front of you, this isn't the way I had scripted my life out. In fact, I remember joking with the Lord that night, I said, "God, you've never seen me hit a curve ball. I mean, I've got this." I was headed in one direction and God had to take a 2 x 4 and say, "I need you to change directions."

Another thunder moment in my life and I've shared it in the past so I won't belabor it. A few years later, there was a young lady who walked into the Elite Cafe of Waco, Texas and she walked in the door and the Lord said, "That's her." Her name's Tracy. That's who I'm talking about right there. That's her. I was on a different path. Does that communicate? Headed a different direction. The Lord said, "No, no, no, I need you to switch paths."

There had been years since the time in Colorado, now I'm in the middle of Texas and there had been some other events involving education and such, but let me share with you the last what I call thunder moment in my life. Now I'll be honest, I probably had about five or six, that's it if you classify them, and I've been walking with the Lord almost 40

years so, I mean, I've had a lot of time period. About 2 ½ years ago, I was going about my life. Everything was great. I mean, I thought I was just doing everything I was supposed to be doing and all was good. It was on a Monday morning, this wasn't what I expected, it's not what I was thinking. We had one of the ladies that worked in our office there at the church I was serving, she came to me, I was in the midst of a conversation with a group of other folks, she handed me a piece of paper, that piece of paper had a name on it and a phone number that began with 334. I didn't know where that was. When I looked it up, I didn't even know how to pronounce it, but when I got that piece of paper, it was thunder. The Lord said, "Get ready, you're changing paths."

Now for those of you that may get nervous about that story and the frequency thereof, I'm going to give you a little phrase that I've adopted: Texas born, Texas bred, please, O God, let me be Alabama dead. Alright, so get that out of the way.

So there have been those moments, there have been those times just like Ananias, completely changes your direction, maybe changes your career, maybe changes your location, maybe changes a relationship. I mean, you've got it scheduled for Plan A and he says, "I've got Plan B."

Let me share with you the danger of listening for thunder. The danger is it is so phenomenal, it is so incredible, it is so clear. You can go back to the place, you can hear it, you can even smell the room. The danger is you being to think that if that's not how I heard from God, I must not have heard from God. The danger is you're living year to year or decade to decade. That doesn't discount what the Lord did in those moments when he hit you over the head with a spiritual 2 x 4, but the danger is you begin to live your life saying, "Unless it is a radical change, unless it is something that I would have never scheduled on my own, then it must not be from God."

You see, when it comes to looking for lightning, you may have had one of those experiences but very few of us have. When it comes to listening for thunder, quite a few of us could account for multiple times in life where God just really got a hold of us and it changed everything. The danger is that lightning is rare at best, and thunder is so infrequent we cannot live our relationship with the Lord waiting for your 3, 5, 7 and 10 to come and the next big event in our life, which leads to the third way in which the Lord speaks and we're to listen. Look at verse 20, it says, "And straightway he," that's Paul, "he preached Christ in the synagogues, that he is the Son of God." Then you get to verse 22, it says he proved "that this is the very Christ."

Now let me unpack that for just a moment. When whom we know as Paul goes into the synagogues and he preaches Christ, he did not give his personal testimony. Why? Because in a Jewish synagogue, if you've ever been a part of one of the services, they don't have testimony time, they don't have special music time. In fact, here's what they do, they roll out the scrolls, or in today's context they get out the Torah, the first five books of the Bible, they read from the Scriptures and they preach the Scriptures. So in other words, when Paul rolls into the synagogue and it says he preached Christ, he didn't

give his testimony and said, "Man, I was on the road to Damascus, saw a light, it was crazy." He opened up the Scriptures and said, "Let me tell you about Jesus."

Now I know what you're thinking, "Well, where did he open up?" I don't know. He might have opened up in Genesis 22 where Abraham takes Isaac up for the sacrifice. He might have said, "This foreshadowed who I just met on the road to Damascus." He might have opened to Isaiah 53 where it talks about the Suffering Servant. He said, "The one whom we crucified 18 months ago, I just met him on the road to Damascus." He might have even opened up the minor prophet known as Micah that talks about he was born in Bethlehem and said, "Hey, when I was a wee little kid like you, he was born, he lived, he died, he rose. I met him on the road to Damascus just the other night." The reason that I want to call your attention to that specific passage is that he did not preach his story, he did not preach his testimony, he spoke to them from the word of God. Here is the distinctiveness to the quiet voice of God, is it primarily comes from the reading and the listening to his word.

Now I'm sure many of you are familiar with this last spring season we as a church family, a lot of us, went through a Bible study known as Master Life. This next fall, we're going to offer Master Life 1 & 2 as well as 3 & 4. We've got sign-up sheets everywhere. You can go on the website. But all that being said, something we're going to begin this fall that I'm so excited about, beginning in mid-August we as a church family, now that doesn't mean that you're in the preschool or you can be in senior adults, everywhere in between, one of our who knows how many services that we offer, if you're associated with us, we're going to begin a three year Bible reading plan. Now it might be a chapter one day, two chapters the next, occasionally we're going to give you a break. The way that it's going to work out is that if you get on this Bible reading plan and you can just be associated with us, you can be on another continent and participate with us, is every Sunday when we gather together, we're going to study from and preach from the word of God based on the passages that we've read throughout that week, and the purpose of it is to have a daily experience with the word of God because I know and you know thunder doesn't happen every week and lightning doesn't happen every week, but in this story, these men who built the basket and lowered Paul, they didn't hear thunder and they didn't see lightning but they put their lives in just as much risk as Paul and Ananias did.

In fact, if you have Isaiah 30 open, I'm going to call your attention there real briefly. Let me remind you of what's taken place in Isaiah 30. The Israelites, particularly the southern kingdom, they are being warned that if they do not repent, if they do not turn from their wicked ways, that Babylon is coming, captivity is coming, being taken away for 70 years is coming, the temple being taken down is coming. In other words, if they don't pay attention to what God is saying to them, they're headed the wrong direction real fast. Isaiah 30 in the midst of this, verse 21, I want you to hear what the Lord says.

21 And your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, This is the way, walk you in it, when you turn to the right hand, and when you turn to the left.

Let me tell you what Israel's problem was in the Old Testament: they were waiting for lightning, they were listening for thunder, and the Lord was quietly whispering in their ear. He said, "I just need you to go this way and I need you to go that way." Let me remind you when you get to the New Testament, it was the Pharisees who said, "But Jesus, you've healed, you've walked on water, but we need a sign. We need some thunder. We need some lightning."

Let me share with you the danger of when the Lord speaks in your ear. Here's the danger: that somehow, some way, you think that it's less important than the thunder or the lightning; that somehow it's insignificant; that the heavens didn't open up, it didn't radically change things. But notice what he said to the Israelites, "If you'll just turn to the right, if you'll just turn to the left." He didn't do it with thunder. He didn't do it with lightning. He quietly whispered in their ear.

You see, the danger for you and I today is that when we open the word of God, as we prayerfully study the word of God, it's thinking, "Well, this is fine but it's not thunder. This is fine but it's not lightning." What we discover is just like these men did in Acts 9, when we hear the word of God, study the word of God, and obey the word of God, we find ourselves in the exact same position whether it was thunder or lightning. All three incidences ended with obedience, even though the communication was dramatically different. You know, maybe today you spent your entire life waiting for lightning, or maybe it's been years since you heard the thunder and said, "Boy, I'd love some thunder in my life," is it possible that from the word of God he's just quietly whispering in your ear?

Let's pray with our heads bowed and our eyes closed. You know, maybe you're that person today, and by the way, I'm not faulting you. I think we've all be guilty of it, maybe you're that person who was looking and listening while the Lord was quietly speaking, and maybe where you are in life, the Lord has been speaking of your need of a relationship with him, of your need to believe in Jesus, of your need to turn from your sins, and maybe you're guilty of saying, "Well, I'll do so when the heavens open up. Or I'll do so when I hear the thunder." Maybe today, maybe for the very first time, you're willing to take a step back and say, "You know, maybe he's just quietly whispering in my ear."

If you're that person today, let me encourage you, let me encourage you just to have a conversation with the Lord. You don't have to go to a room filled with thunder or a field filled with lightning, just have a conversation, not out loud and not necessarily the same words I might say but maybe your conversation with the Lord would go a little something like this. "God, today I just want to confess, I spent my whole life looking for lightning and listening for thunder but all these days you've been quietly whispering in my ear of my need for you. So God, today I come and I quit. I quit. I'm going to quit fighting you. I'm going to quit arguing with you. I'm going to quit running from you. God, today I believe. I believe that Jesus Christ loved me so much he was willing to be born on my behalf. I believe that Jesus Christ loved me so much he was willing to live a sinless life on my behalf. I believe that Jesus Christ loved me so much that he was willing to pay the



price of my sin on the cross and three days later he rose from the dead so I could be forgiven and I could be saved. God, today I'm going to be honest, I don't have all the answers to all the problems of the world but I do know that Jesus Christ is the answer to my sin problem. In the best way I know how, I want to not only believe in you but turn my life over to you."

With our heads still bowed and our eyes still closed, maybe today you had that conversation with the Lord. We'd love to have a conversation with you. Or maybe today you would say, "I've had a relationship with the Lord for years," maybe even decades, and maybe today you take a step back when you look at the Scripture and say, "You know what? I remember the thunder." And maybe you've experienced the lightning, but maybe you're missing out on an incredible journey with the Lord if you would just listen to his whisper.

*Lord, as we come to this time, thank you. Thank you that no matter what we're guilty of in the past or what we have done, that your mercy, your grace and your love so far exceeds all of that that all you desire right now is for us to be in a right relationship with you whatever that looks like. Help us, O God, to respond to you appropriately. It is in the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.*

I'm going to encourage you to stand with me as our team leads us. Any and all decisions, I'll be right here at the front.