

For the serious Christian, it's hard to find a more powerful reality in the Old Testament than the story of Abraham! Sure, there's a host of extraordinary connectors with God in the Old Testament. But there's a special place for Abraham, a special role for Abraham. And there are lessons for a life in God that Abraham exemplifies in quite extraordinary ways. And that's what this podcast series is all about.

Our opening episode was about Abraham's immensely important preparatory years—his first 75 years of life. In the absence of distractions like machines and technology, Abram was constantly marinating in the stories about his family history. Of course, that family was really *all* of humanity, a pretty small number of people back then. Embedded in that history were some of the key accounts of the pioneering relations between God and humans: God's creation, the Fall, His wrath, His saving actions, His faithfulness. Abram absorbed it all, and the weight of that history would serve as ballast for his life and his responses to God.

So, in this episode, we pick up the beginning of *Abraham's* recorded story at Genesis 12:1-2. "Now the Lord said to Abram, 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.'" And our focus in this episode is on the first six words of that passage: "*Now the Lord said to Abram...*" Wow, isn't that powerful?!? Again, those six words: *Now the Lord said to Abram.*

The God Who had spoken creation into existence, the God Who had created Adam and Eve, the God Who had sent the great Flood, the God Who had directed Noah about the ark and saved him and his family...well, here God was speaking to Abram—and saying something very important!

Now, this raises questions to a curious mind. Was this the first time God spoke directly to Abram? Did Abram easily recognize God's voice? Was Abram alone with God? Was this an inner witness that only Abram could hear? Regardless of the answers, we do know at least the following three very important things to be true. First, God spoke to Abram. Second, Abram truly heard God. Third, Abram sowed his hearing in good soil. Now, all parts of that triad *and* their sequence are very important. What sets Abram and every other true follower of God apart from the ordinary is the true hearing and the type of sowing.

So, the receiver's hearing is key. But here's the most vital foundation for us: hearing from God, while very special, of course, is designed by God Himself to be a "given" in the life of God-followers *today!* But, in fact, that expected "hearing" is sometimes made controversial, even by serious Christians who are genuinely concerned that such "listening to God" is wrong, is going to get out of hand, get abused. Now, the benefit of the doubt should be that these folks might say, first, that the Word of God, the Bible, is the go-to. And we know that truth is right on! Then, they might say, we should rely on hearing from our pastors and other counselors. And that's good too...but, I hasten to say, that's good only if we select our pastor and counselors very wisely. But waaaait a minute, next up is that thorny barrier: you mean to say that God's *voice* is actually directing a believer's steps...directing a path? Whoa...whoa...stop that wagon!

But let's just put it right out there! Jesus said this in John 10:14-15 (ESV): "I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep." So now that we have just been reminded that Jesus is the good shepherd whom we know, Jesus also said in John 10:4b (ESV): "The sheep follow [the shepherd], for they know his voice." Wow! We. Know. Jesus's. Voice. End of story. Biblically! And that's the beginning of an amazing life-long journey!

But let's cut to the chase. Is God's voice available only through the Word of God that's written down as part of the Bible? If so, why didn't Jesus limit the scope of such a parable to only the readers of the written word? No, it was the *voice* of the Shepherd, and not just a few key selections of the voice written down for the sheep to read! Indeed, the Holy Spirit is expected to be active, too, in the hearing of the voice of God—Jesus taught His disciples in John 14:26. "But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you."

So, is this teaching of *all* things by the Holy Spirit limited to just remembrance to Jesus's words? Well, no, because it's *in addition to* bringing that remembrance, it's clear that the Holy Spirit will teach Jesus's disciples *all things!* God is active in teaching us in the present day—we can and should expect to “hear” from Him in some fashion, and hear as regularly, as routinely as any eager student and willing teacher might work together. But then, here's the big question: does our hearing bear fruit? Well, Jesus addressed just that specific kind of situation in the famous Parable of the Sower.

Here are verses found in Mark 4:13-20: “And [Jesus] said to them, ‘Do you not understand this parable? How then will you understand all the parables? The sower sows the word. And these are the ones along the path, where the word is sown: when they hear, Satan immediately comes and takes away the word that is sown in them. And these are the ones sown on rocky ground: the ones who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with joy. And they have no root in themselves, but endure for a while; then, when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away. And others are the ones sown among thorns. They are those who hear the word, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches and the desires for other things enter in and choke the word, and it proves unfruitful. But those that were sown on the good soil are the ones who hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold.’”

Right there, Jesus assumes that a sower sows the word and that someone hears! Then Jesus distinguishes between faulty hearing and that hearing being sown on good soil. So then, how are we to discern between the truly authentic voice of God and the lesser but loud cacophony of voices in our lives? Well, the authentic voice we're hearing will resonate with the Word of God, with God's character, with His purposes, with His expectations for believers...like loving neighbors, and going forth and making disciples!

So, we know that we should expect to hear the voice of the good shepherd who sows—Jesus! But what about the voice of the Holy Spirit? Now, it's kind of mind-boggling, but the fact is that the startling opinion of some Christians is that God can speak through fallible human counselors to us but that the Holy Spirit who dwells in us is unable to speak to us, to teach us. Well, how about this door-closing truth about fully hearing from God as recorded by the Apostle John? In Revelation 2:7, the Bible says, “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.” You see, this passage wasn't just about John hearing directly from God to write the Book of Revelation, it was the specific instructions to the later readers of this very Word *to really, truly hear*. Let's not lose sight of this key: we must understand the important distinction between simple hearing and the full hearing that is of God, by the Word *and* by the Spirit!

And that brings us back to Abram and those six words: *Now the Lord said to Abram...* And we know all these centuries later that God's words to Abram fell on good soil. So, here the key point: it's about what *true hearing can beget*. Now we know the word “beget” from reading that old-fashioned Biblical word a bunch of times—you know, like in family genealogies, but also in other precipitative events. So, to “beget” can mean “to procreate, to create a child.” And it also means “to give rise to” or “to bring about.”

To be sure, God has spoken many times throughout history. And countless people have heard God speak or heard his Word spoken. So, yes, they have “heard”—and that's good! But many have let that speaking immediately get robbed by the enemy, or get sown on rocky soil, or get throttled by thorns. Of course, we don't know exactly *how* Abram received what the Lord said to him—was it audible, perhaps even thundering down from on high? Or was it quietly said to Abram in the stillness of a tent in a desert? But what we *do* know is that Abram *really heard in the Parable of the Sower sense*. Abram prepared good soil.

Here's the deal. Simple “hearing” isn't always a *begetting* hearing, for Abram or for us! The richest fullness of relationship with God depends on how we've prepared to receive what He has said, whether from hearing the Word or the teaching of the Holy Spirit! This is the amazing privilege of the God-follower: intimacy of another order of magnitude, with manifold fruits to come! So...just how good is *your* hearing?

