

**Revelation 1:1-3**  
**(Psalm 119:33-40; Matthew 7:24-27)**  
**“Blessed Are Those Who Hear and Keep What Is Written”**

## **Introduction**

How would you answer someone who asked, “Does God speak to you? And if he does, how does he do it? Is it audible? Do you hear a voice as if someone were in the room speaking? Or is it an inner voice, perhaps a strong impression that something is true or that a particular course of action should be taken?” Certainly every biblical Christian believes that God speaks, that he communicates with his people. But I’m asking now about our personal experience of what we believe, but may not really understand. How do we answer the question of how God speaks to us?

Of course, because he is God, he can communicate with anyone in any way consistent with who he is and what he has promised. In fact, the Bible tells us quite clearly that God does communicate with humanity through virtually everything. As the psalmist writes, “The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky proclaims his handiwork” (Psalm 19:1). God can speak to us through pain and suffering, through the voice of conscience, through the comfort of a friend, through a parent’s love or a spouse’s forgiveness. He can speak through the deep impressions that we feel.

But here is the distinction I want to underscore: God communicates through these things much as we communicate with our families by paying the bills, preparing meals or mowing the lawn. We do those things needed by the family and hope that they realize that we do it out of love for them. And if we do these things well, with intelligence and artistry, then our deeds tell much about us to those who study them. However, if that is *all* we ever do, and we expect our families simply to draw their own conclusions from what we do for them – in other words, if we never say, “I love you. I want only the best that life has for you” – then the relationship is impoverished, and they may not be quite certain what to make of our behavior.

So, it is important to understand that all of the various ways that God communicates to us can only be understood and trusted if we can relate them to the words that he has spoken to us. But that brings us back to our original question: How does he speak to us with such clarity that we can use that sure word to interpret all the other ways that we believe that he communicates with us?

*In the opening verses of the book of Revelation, the final book of the Bible, we have a description of the way that God speaks a sure word to us and, just as importantly, John goes on to tell us how we can be confident that it is God who is speaking to us, and how we can be confident that we understand his message to us.*

## Body

### 1. How does God speak to us?

Of all the ways that God declares his glory everywhere and at all times, is there a sure and certain word that we can know is his and that enables us to understand the rest? John says, "Yes!"

#### *First, God speaks to us through Jesus Christ.*

Jesus is the living Word of God, and we can only be sure of who God is by gazing at Jesus as he is revealed in the Scriptures and recognizing that he came to make the Father known. It is not just this particular revelation that God gave Jesus "to show to his servants the things that must soon take place" (1:1) – it is all revelation. The author of Hebrews puts it like this: "Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son ... He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power" (Heb 1:1-3).

This is a crucial point and one that we too often miss and, as a result, mishandle the Bible. Augustine said that the Bible was repugnant to him until Ambrose taught him how to read it. What did he mean? We are all horrified at the thought that some Muslims would kill a person, even a family member, for changing his views about who God is and what he requires. "How could they think God desires such a thing?" we ask. We are appalled and outraged when we hear of parents abusing a child and saying that the child was being unruly. We can hardly bear to hear of ISIS killing everyone, including children, in areas they have conquered. What monsters! Yet the Old Testament describes and even legislates these exact same behaviors. We just don't notice, because it's in the Bible, not in the Koran. A few examples:

If your brother, the son of your mother, or your son or your daughter or the wife you embrace or your friend who is as your own soul entices you secretly, saying, "let us go and serve other gods" ... you shall not yield to him or listen to him, nor shall your eye pity him, nor shall you spare him, nor shall you conceal him. But you shall kill him. Your hand shall be first against him to put him to death (Deuteronomy 13:6f).

In the cities of these peoples that the LORD your God is giving you for an inheritance you shall save nothing alive that breathes (Deuteronomy 20:16f).

If a man has a stubborn and rebellious son who will not obey the voice of his father or the voice of his mother, and, though they discipline

him, will not listen to them, then his father and his mother shall take hold of him and bring him out to the elders of his city at the gate of the place where he lives ... then all the men of the city shall stone him to death with stones. So you shall purge evil from your midst, and all Israel shall hear, and fear (Deutronoy 21:18f).

O daughter of Babylon, doomed to be destroyed, blessed shall he be who repays you with what you have done to us! Blessed shall he be who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rock! (Psalm 137:8f).

If we simply read the Bible as a book of rules to be followed or behaviors to be imitated, we will shipwreck our lives. The only way to understand the Bible is as the Spirit-breathed sweeping narrative of God's dealings with humanity in all of its brokenness and need and misunderstanding of his ways, and how he has made full provision to redeem a new humanity in Christ Jesus and recreate the cosmos.

As John Walton of Wheaton College, author of such books as *The Lost World of Adam and Eve*, has written, "The Bible was written *for* us but not *to* us." In other words, it was written by ancient people and to ancient people, and both authors and original readers accepted the science, the culture, the warfare, the slavery, the ownership of women and children as one's property, as normative. The Bible never criticizes many things that to us, because of the Gospel of Jesus, are repugnant. It was these things, recorded for our benefit, that the Gospel turns upside down.

Jesus often taught in a way that completely subverted the old order of things: "You have heard it said ... but I say to you ..." "Moses gave you divorce because of your hardness of heart, but that is not God's intention for you!" said Jesus. When criticized for breaking the Sabbath, Jesus responded that "the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath," and reminded his critics that David was saved as he fled from Saul by eating the bread of presence which, Jesus said, "it was not lawful for him to eat." Yet Jesus approved David's lawbreaking, not of God's moral law, not of the Ten Commandments, but of the laws governing Israel, laws that to break was a capital offence in Israel.

Unless we read the Bible through the story of Jesus Christ, through his tender love and compassion toward the broken and his impatience with injustice, cruelty and oppression, we will simply create our own modern versions of ancient religions, and be as lost as was the Old Covenant community in its painful attempt to keep the rules while rejecting the Messiah. Anything that we cannot imagine Jesus saying or doing should at least raise for us a red flag. Now, Jesus said many things that sound hard to our ears, but we should seek

prayerfully to read the Bible through the lense of the Gospel. Much more could and should be said, but we must press on.

***Jesus communicates with us through messengers.***

What Jesus revealed directly to the apostles during his days of living and ministering among them, he accomplished after his ascension to heaven by sending them messengers. In this case, John says that the messenger was an angel (the Greek word means messenger), sent by Jesus to reveal these things to John. If you have read Revelation, you will know that whenever John was overwhelmed by the presence of these angels and tried to bow down and worship them, they became quite indignant and said, "Don't do that! We are creatures just like you. Worship God alone!" The key seems to be that someone is sent to us, to speak in a way that is clear and understandable, to stand with us, not over us, and point us to the Lord.

***Jesus speaks his word to us uniquely and authoritativeley through his apostles.***

That is the task of the apostles to those of us who came after. Here we see the formation of the Scriptures. John is told, "Write what you see in a book and send it to the seven churches" (1:11). The apostles wrote down what God communicated to them and circulated these writings to the churches over which they had pastoral oversight. It is this deposit, this record, this Word from God that forms for the Christian the clear and authoritative Word against which we test every other word that we may think God is speaking to us.

**2. But that raises the question, how do we hear God speak?**

Eugene Peterson describes the centrality of Scripture as God's primary means of communication in these words: "Holy Scripture is the source document, the authoritative font, the work of the Spirit that is definitive in all true spirituality." He then addresses the kind of reading required of those who would know the truth and the freedom it brings:

What I mean to insist upon is that spiritual writing – *Spirit*-sourced writing – requires spiritual reading, a reading that honors words as holy, words as a basic means of forming an intricate web of relationships between God and the human, between things visible and things invisible. There is only one way of reading that is congruent with our Holy Scriptures, writing that trusts in the power of words to penetrate our lives and create truth and beauty and goodness ... reading that enters our souls as food enters our stomachs, spreads through our blood, and becomes holiness and love and wisdom (Eugene Peterson in *Eat This Book*).

***Blessed are those who read God's Word.***

John uses the singular here, "the one who reads," because the letter was written by hand and had to be circulated and read aloud to the churches. There were, of course, no printing presses, and obtaining a copy of any part of the Scripture was expensive, so Christians had to memorize the scriptures, and the process started by having them read in worship services such as this one. John says that God will bless those who read his word to his people. I don't think that it is stretching the point at all to encourage those who take time to read God's Word to their children or to people who are shut-in or in the hospital, or who participate in Bible studies and simply take a turn at reading the Scriptures.

But, beyond that, it is incumbent first of all in this age of easy access to God's Word to know the blessing of reading God's Word daily to oneself. *Do you do this? If not, why?* Imagine having a pantry full of food and starving to death. People are starving to death spiritually every day who have several Bibles gathering dust on the shelf at home.

***Blessed are those who hear what is read.***

John intended to include not only the one who read, but also the many who would sit and listen to the reader. But there is an additional aspect to what he is saying that we must not overlook: too often we read without ever hearing what we are reading. As Eugene Peterson has written, we must "learn to turn our eyes into ears." In other words, God does not want his Word to remain merely marks on a page. He wants those words to become a Word spoken into our lives, gripping heart and mind and changing us.

***Blessed are those who keep God's Word.***

John writes, "blessed are those who hear, *and who keep* what is written in it." "Keep" means "obey," as when I tell you that I kept my promise, or I kept my word, or I try to keep the Lord's commandments. That doesn't simply mean that I revere them, but that I *obey* them. Here is the great missing link for most of us, I suspect. Remember that we understand and recognize God's Word to the degree that we obey it.

We need to read God's Word and seek to follow Christ in community, that is, in accountable relationships with a few people who know us well enough to help us, not only understand, but begin to live the truth of Christ. Only within Christ's body will we find the resources to walk out the truth we learn in our reading and listening.

**3. So how do we start?**

### ***So, what do I do with this? How do I begin?***

How do I leave here this morning with something more concrete than a guilt trip for not reading or meditating on God's Word daily? I am renewing my challenge to set aside twenty minutes every day to care for the only part of you that will survive your physical death: to care for your soul. It is an invitation to a journey toward the City of God, a journey of wholeness and well-being, of the wisdom and intimacy and love that we all long for because we were made for it.

John's words can be adapted quite well to a classic form of spiritual reading that has benefited many across the centuries. It requires no more time commitment – less really – than most of us commit to staying healthy or developing a hobby that interests us. Simply spend twenty minutes at the start of your day on the greatest journey of life, the journey into the very heart of God. You might start this way:

***Read:*** Spend five minutes reading a small portion of God's Word.

***Reflect:*** Meditate for another five minutes on that portion you have read.

***Respond:*** Turn that meditation to prayer, as you spend five minutes discussing with the Lord what you think he may be saying to you through his Word.

***Rest:*** Spend the final five minutes in silence, listening, yielding your ideas, your plans, your control, to the Lord.

As you launch out on your daily journey, again pray: "Lord, I give you my body, my mind, my heart. Live through me today."

### **Conclusion**

What are you going to do with this? Does God speak to you? Of course he does! Are you listening? Are you reading, hearing, and taking his Word to heart so that nothing brings you greater joy than obeying him? Are you on the way to life? You are on a path going somewhere: where are you going?