

# **Listening to the Lord**

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## Author's Preface

Which would you rather have – a hundred of your own bright ideas or a word from the Lord? One word from heaven rescues us from straitjacketed thinking, religious ritual and nit-picking legalism. It births visions, changes mindsets, cuts through confusion and transforms vague ideas into full-blown visions.

The flesh wavers and the devil does his ugly best to hinder our hearing and to confuse our thinking, but God is even *more* eager to speak to us than we are to **listen**. In which case it makes excellent sense for us to study the processes by which the Lord speaks, so that we can develop both the ability and the *confidence* to listen and then to act on what we have heard.

Listening embraces attentiveness – to God, to one another and to what the Lord is doing in our hearts. Just as we ‘hear’ each other in more ways than the purely audible, so we are to ‘hear’ the Lord with every part of our being. That is why I have done my best to focus on the ways of the Lord as well as on the specifics, the ‘mechanics’ if you like, of how we are to hear Him. It is the nearest I could get to writing a textbook: a ‘manual’ on listening to God.

We should never seek to reduce something as precious as listening to the Lord to mechanical formulae. These are themes and topics to explore *in* the Lord’s presence. That is why every section provides jumping-off points to reflect on the key ideas and their implications. (You may find it helpful to do these ‘exercises’ with a close friend.)

I have kept in mind that this book should serve as an introduction for people who are considering the whole theme of listening to the Lord for the first time. But at the same time, the passages for reflection will make this an ‘interactive’ experience with the Lord and bring a **fresh perspective** to themes that people may have been familiar with for years. It is our prayer that the Lord Jesus Himself may grant anew to each one who takes the time to ponder and apply these truths the joy of hearing their beloved Lord speak to their inmost being.

Robert Weston, Shetland, 2004

## 1 ~ “Listen to Him”

### 1.1 The call to listen

There is an old cliché that the Lord has given us two ears but only one mouth because He wants us to listen more than talk. Most of us find the reverse much easier – not least when it comes to our relationship with the Lord.

What was the secret of Jesus’ walk with His Father? In John 5:19 we find the answer when He declared: ‘I only do what I see my Father doing.’ Jesus *knew* in His spirit when His Father was prompting Him to stop and pray for a particular person in need of His touch. He knew what was in people’s hearts: and knew full well before it happened that Peter would one day deny Him and Judas betray Him. How did He know? God showed Him, and He listened.

When Jesus took Peter, James and John with him up the mountain we now know as the Mount of Transfiguration He was transfigured before them and a voice came from heaven: "This is my Son, whom I have chosen; *listen* to Him." (Matt17:5)

I believe it is highly significant that the command was not to *pray* to the Son. Jesus had already taught the disciples much about prayer. It only takes us a second or two for us to read this command to *listen* to Him– but it will take a lifetime to work out this principle in practice.

Since all we do will be much sharper if we are in touch with the Lord, listening must begin with intimacy: the desire to draw close to the Lord Jesus, who walks much closer to us than any human father to his son.

It sounds easy enough for the disciples to listen to Jesus. After all, He was right there in front of them. But God knew that they would need to go on listening long after Jesus was no longer physically with them. Just like we have to do today. And He would not have told them to listen carefully to the voice of the Lord unless He knew that it was *possible* for them to do so.<sup>(1)</sup>

Look at all the times when the Lord spoke to Moses or to Joshua or to David. Imagine the Bible shorn of all those passages! What would we be left with? Man’s ideas of what God ought to be like: and a load of prescriptive rules and regulations. It is because God *does* speak and *does* guide His people that listening leads to such exciting adventures!

God comes to an eighty-year-old shepherd, who had been in exile for forty years for striking a man dead and what happens? God uses him to bring an entire nation *out* from under Pharaoh’s bondage, and *into* an entirely new way of life. God speaks to Joshua and the people have the courage to go in and take possession of the Promised Land. God calls a young shepherd, who is also a prophet and a poet, to His service and uses him to depose a corrupt king and to raise up a mighty empire. The Holy Spirit speaks to Paul and churches spring into existence all over Asia Minor. So let’s not be afraid to bring the story up to date: God speaks to you and your life suddenly assumes new significance and takes entirely new directions.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf Exod. 15:26, 23:22, Ezek. 3:10

### For Reflection

**'This is My beloved Son. Listen to Him.'** Turn these words that came from heaven into an underlying refrain in our hearts. Lord Jesus, I love you; may I hear Your voice and honour You, today and every day. Let me see You as You are, and help me to embrace the things that are on Your heart. In Jesus' name, Amen.

### 1.2 The Lord confides in those who fear Him

The Lord confides in those who fear Him ... He takes the upright into His confidence  
(Psalm 25:14, Proverbs 3:32)

Every parent longs for the moment when their child is old enough to take into their confidence. God is no different. He watches and waits for our maturity levels to be sufficiently developed to entrust us with how He feels about things. This may be 'just' at a personal level for reassurance. Checking in at Heathrow Airport the other day, I was dismayed to find a massive backlog. It looked impossible that I could catch my flight. But the Lord gave me a deep assurance that I would! How did He do it? He provided a British Airways 'angel,' who whisked me out of the long queue and checked me through individually. His peace continued in a special way for the rest of the journey that He would open up the country I was heading for, unknown though it was to me. And He did – wonderfully!

When we say 'The Lord told me...' we do not necessarily mean that we have heard an audible voice. What we call 'hearing' is often just the God-given ability to make sense of things that have happened. It is as we 'mix' this awareness with faith (1) that the Lord's leading develops.

### 1:3 The power of Prayer

I find that I am much more likely to hear from the Lord if I am being prayed for. It is as though many insights are just out of reach, like apples up a tree. It is prayer that brings

#### For Reflection

Let's start with the matter of desire. Have you ever known two 'romantically afflicted' people find it difficult to make time to be together? If we are as eager to seek the Lord as we would be to make time to be with the person we are most in love with, we can be sure that out of such intimacy God will lead and speak.

God's insights into reach. Most of the time, of course, the Lord is quite content to communicate His leading by gentle steering touches rather than by specific words. Many of the most precious things that He does in our lives come completely unheralded. There are certain *other* things, however, that we may never be aware of unless we take the trouble to seek the Lord.

As we bring issues to Him He shows us sharper insights and ways to proceed. As we yield ourselves to Him, He directs our steps and warns us when we are in danger of putting off doing something that needs attending to – or going off course altogether.

In all this, our primary need is to *make* time to seek Him, rather than hoping to *find* it. The pressure of our timetables, to say nothing of the enemy's disruptions, ensure that we may never be able to *find* enough time. The scriptural call is to 'seek the Lord with *all* our hearts'. This calls for a combination of *desire* and *discipline*. The one without the other is not enough.

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1 Heb 4:2

#### 1.4 Word and Spirit – From Ruach to The Rock

We have recently moved from a house called *Ruach* (which means breath, wind or Spirit) to *The Rock* – the foundation of our spiritual life. The names of these houses represent the two poles of our spirituality. We are called to move in the power of the Spirit (Ruach) but in a way that is constantly directed and undergirded by the Word of God (The Rock).

Many years ago, Smith Wigglesworth declared it will be when God's people put sufficient emphasis on both the Word and the Spirit that we will experience revival. Precisely because so much in this book may appear to be experience-oriented, it is important to stress from the outset that Word and Spirit *must* flow together in our lives. The truths of the Bible must shape our thinking, saturate our minds and check our impulses if our hearing is to stay on course. It is as we read, study and meditate on His Word that the Lord 'fine-tunes' our spirits and imparts wisdom and direction to our lives.

We hear arguments today from life, from science, from experience, from *anything* in fact rather than from the Word of God. Yet that is the ultimate authority, and it may often serve to point us in quite a different direction from the wisdom of the world. More often than not, clarity comes by the Spirit of God applying the truths of the Word in our hearts.

##### **For Reflection**

Is my 'input' of the Word of God sufficient to direct my thinking?

If we live *only* by the Word, parts of our life will never be watered – but if we seek to live only spontaneously, 'by the Spirit,' sooner or later we will go off course, or even blow up. But if we are living by *both* Word and Spirit we will grow up!

Many great musicians and actors feel that they can only really bring a piece of music or drama to life when they have committed it to memory. This is not the way most westerners live, but since the Word of God assumes new depths once it is stored in the heart perhaps it ought to be. A Chinese believer who was imprisoned for twenty-three years testified on his release how greatly the many passages of Scripture he had committed to memory as a young man had sustained him during those long years.

Bishop Hans Lilje likewise relates that when the Nazis placed him in solitary confinement during the war, what saved his hope and sanity was the constant rehearsing of the psalms and hymns he had learnt as a boy. Most of us do not have bad memories: we simply have untrained and under-developed ones. What would the Lord have us do to rectify this distinctly improvable condition?

#### 1.5 The Path to Transfiguration

As a result of the miracle that took place on the Mount of Transfiguration, Jesus knew His Father's will more intimately, and the disciples had their eyes opened to the nearness of heaven. The end result of listening to the Lord is always transformation and transfiguration.

That is when we experience the stillness of the Lord descending on our meetings, when we are so caught up in Him that it is easy to hear His voice. Such breakthroughs are sovereign initiatives of God – but there are things we can do that will help to predispose His coming: first to prepare our hearts by slowing down and spending time with Him and then by making appropriate frameworks.

Virtually every time we meet together with other Christians, whether on the phone or face to face in person, we share matters that are prayer-worthy. The secret is to take this a stage further and to turn from sharing into prayer. It is as simple and as challenging as saying: 'let's pray together.' How much the Lord chooses to fill this framework is up to Him: our task it to get on with seeking Him.

Let's take the question of our hearts. In the Greek text of Acts 2:1 it says that on the day of Pentecost the disciples were literally 'together together': that is, together in spirit as well as in one physical place. There is nothing God blesses more than unity and honesty with one another. It only takes one break in an electric ring to short the whole circuit. It is disturbing how gravely our witness can be weakened by one serious break in fellowship. Joshua 7 and Acts 5 provided sobering warnings. Disobedience scrambles out hearing and can cause us, and others, to miss out on the purposes of God. But the Lord draws near when He sees our repentant heart and allows us fresh opportunities.

### **For Reflection**

If you are gifted with spiritual imagination, try picturing the scene we described at the start of this section, Jesus' Transfiguration.<sup>(1)</sup> Imagine yourself on the mountainside with the three disciples. Feel their shock at seeing Jesus thus transfigured and Elijah and Moses appearing to him. The disciples are taken aback, their reaction rather wooden.

Now, what would the Lord say to you?

How do *you* feel when the voice comes from heaven?

*Lord, I confess that I have missed many opportunities to seek your face. I Right now I want to face up to my lack of courage as well as to my lack of vision. Help me to take advantage of the opportunities that come my way, and to make the frameworks to seek your face.  
In Jesus' name, Amen.*

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1 Matthew 17:1-8

## 2 ~ Recognise His Voice

For God does speak, now one way, now another, though man may not perceive it. In a dream, in a vision of the night, when deep sleep falls on men as they slumber in their beds, He may speak in their ears and terrify them with warnings, to turn man from wrongdoing and keep him from pride.

(Job 33:14-17)

Start a conversation on the subject of listening to the Lord and see what happens. You are bound to hear the old well-worn excuses trotted out. 'I'm not the sort of person the Lord would speak to!' I am inclined to answer, 'I understand where you're coming from, but don't limit either yourself or God. If the Lord does not choose to speak, that's an end to the matter. But in all probability, God already *has* been speaking to you, even though you may not have *realised* that it was Him speaking.' (1)

The world around us reminds us of the infinite variety of God's creativity. God could have created one species of tree or fern, but He created thousands. It is the same with every aspect of nature. God is interested in everything that happens on Planet Earth - and He has countless ways of speaking to us.

Some of these require little further explanation. We have all known times when passages from the Bible or Christian books have taken on a special meaning for us, or when a preacher's words have spoken directly to our situation. Such occasions reassure us that God knows and cares about us. An unexpected urge to ring or visit someone, a chance remark which brings helps and comfort – these are experiences most of us will be familiar with. They are often so unspectacular at the time that it is only afterwards that we realise it *was* the Lord who was speaking to us.

Father, thank You that You want to speak to me. Help me to recognise the ways that You come to me, and to become more confident in hearing Your voice.  
In Jesus' name, Amen.

### 2.1 Beyond Words

When we are watching a film, our attention is sometimes drawn to a person or an object by the way the camera pans in on it. We just 'know' that the candle on the mantelpiece is going to be significant – and sure enough it sets the house on fire a few minutes later! The director knows exactly what he is doing, skilfully drawing our attention to the item without needing to say a word.

This is how God works when He places quiet impressions in our heart. These can range from gentle Force One nudges to occasional hurricane-strength Force Twelve commands. The more spiritually tuned in we are, the easier we will find it to pick these up. Think of Simeon. Mary and Joseph were presenting the baby Jesus to the Lord (2). God had promised him that he would live to see the Messiah born, and He alerted him to go to the Temple at just the right moment. How many millions of such God-inspired nudges have there been since then!

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1 John 3:27

2 Luke 2:24f

Imagine your spirit as a finely balanced pair of scales. There is need to place an iron ingot at one end; the slightest pressure should be all that is required to tip them in one direction or the other. If we are keeping our spiritual antennae up, at any time the Lord can show us things that we would otherwise miss. What should we be open to? Everything from sweeping the basement stairs to visiting someone in need. With practice we learn when the ‘anointing’ to do something is running out and we should turn our attention to something else.

## 2.2 More about these Spiritual Nudges

As they talked and discussed these things with each other, Jesus Himself came up and walked along with them; but they were kept from recognizing Him. (Luke 24:14)

It seems extraordinary that people who had known Jesus ‘in the flesh’ could have failed to recognise Him. But that is precisely what happened. Cleopas and Mary (in all probability the same couple who saw Jesus crucified) were walking on the road to Emmaus bemoaning the loss of their master. The fact is that Jesus came to them – as He often does to us – in a different form.(1)

More times than I can count I have experienced what I can only term ‘nudges’ to do certain things. Usually, the reasons for these have been immediately apparent. Most of us have

### For Reflection

People talk seriously about ‘What would Jesus do?’ (WWJD ) I prefer to ask, ‘In any given situation, what is Jesus already doing?’ If we are seeking Him with all our hearts, whether by circumstantial leading or by direct command, the Lord will make sure that we too are on time and in place when it really matters.

known times when we have felt led (often without understanding precisely how or why) to visit someone or to say something which has turned out to be exactly right for the situation.

Nudges are nothing if not exceedingly practical. As a young Christian I was on my way to preach for the first time at a Baptist church. I was pushed for time, but as I walked briskly up the High Street the Lord told me clearly to go back and look at my car. ‘That sounds a bit self-indulgent, Lord: it will make me late for the meeting.’ ‘Go back and look at your car!’ He repeated. And there was smoke billowing into the cab from under the bonnet! There was only one other person around pulling up to park. I went across to him, and, feeling very foolish, asked: ‘Are you an expert at putting out car fires.’ To my astonishment he replied, ‘Yes!’ He got an extinguisher out of his car and saved my car.(2)

My wife (Ros) recently felt led to pursue plans to study for an MSc by distance learning. With an ultra-busy job and a demanding pre-schooler the idea seemed crazy – but the Lord gave her peace about it. First her employers agreed that she could do her job over three and a half days, thus freeing up an extra day for study. Then a friend (not even a

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1 CS Lewis illustrates this brilliantly in *The Horse and his Boy* when Aslan, the lion, takes the form of small cat to comfort a boy who was obliged to spend a night amongst haunted ruins. I believe that more of us have received pictures and words from the Lord in the course of a meeting or a time of prayer than we have dared to believe or act on.

2 I have had numerous examples since then of automobile grace. Approaching my vehicle some years ago I felt a strong desire to check the tyres; it turned out that one of them had been let down. On another occasion, I suddenly sensed that I should check my oil level. It turned out to be critically low.



Christian one) declared, 'Apply for the course and the funding will come in'. Ros discerned the voice of the Lord in that apparently casual comment and went ahead. Within a week of the course starting she won a national award that covered to the penny the cost of the degree.

In God's economy, one nudge often leads to other doors opening. When a person came to mind some months ago, I followed up the nudge and got in contact with him, as I usually do. It turned out that at the precise moment I was thinking of him, he was being reminded of a word which I had given him a year before, and which had made the difference to a situation he was facing.

I thought no more about it until, a few weeks after that, he offered me a part-time post as a 'prayer-consultant' working with him on a regular basis. This has proved fruitful and beneficial for us both in all sorts of ways.

A few weeks ago I was talking on the phone with him when he suddenly stopped the conversation and said, almost abruptly, 'I sense a great pain in your heart.' He then specified what he felt this pain was related to. He had seen truly and recommended a specific course of action to take. It is wonderful to be in touch with people who sense and hear so clearly.

In God's economy, following one nudge often leads to other doors opening.

It is important that we heed these impressions and inner convictions. The strange thing is that what we sometimes experience as just a faint impression is, in reality, an all-important reminder to pray for people who are going through enormous pressures. If we are sensitive in our spirit and faithful in following up these nudges, they serve a crucial role in getting us to pray and be in contact with the person in question.

How does the Lord communicate His nudges to you? Many wonderful things will come about if you can identify the nudges that He sends. May He develop your ability to discern His promptings, and your willingness to act on them.

### **2:3 'By another Route' - Turning Sight into Insight**

The Lord Jesus drew powerfully on the world around Him in His teaching. He used spiritual parallels and parables from everyday life: the sower and the seed, the woman who lost a coin, the missing sheep, the unjust judge – these were images drawn from a world his contemporaries were entirely familiar with. The Lord often speaks to us from the world about us, highlighting something and bringing it into sharp spiritual focus.

Christine Larkin, who led a prophetic conference on Shetland, was the most recent of a number of visiting speakers who sensed immediately that God has a special strategic plan for our islands at this time. She felt God's excitement bubbling up inside her and declared with great authority that *God* is bringing this plan together.

She also declared that there is a strong wind coming – not a gentle wind, but one that will lift roofs off. It so happens that the church in which the conference was being held was hit by a powerful wind some years ago that lifted the roof right up, before putting it down again in a slightly different position. This was a picture to her of how the Lord *needs* to lift the roofs in our minds that condition 'how we think church should be done'. She went on to explain that God wants to move away from the whole idea of the one-man leader who stands up front and directs the action. God wants us all to be involved. Every Christian

on our island is part of His plan and needs to realise how they fit into God's wider picture. This word fits in well with others that the Lord has given. The fact that the roof of another church building has just blown off only serves to highlight the point. The way church has been will not suffice to make a significant impact on society.

The other day Ros and I went for a walk beside a *voe* (a Shetlandic fjord). A small track up a hill was calling to me, but I considered it too muddy for the shoes I was wearing. We went round a corner, where the ground was drier. A few minutes later we were enjoying

There is nothing impersonal or mechanical about the way God leads us. But, like a skilful investigator, we will often have to piece together what God is saying over a particular issue until we feel comfortable to pray a particular prayer or to implement a specific policy.

the sweeping views from the top of the hill. The Lord met with me here and pointed out that I couldn't get up there in one go, but that I had reached the same place now by a different route. It was a parable of how He is leading me.

Such experiences point to the fact that meaning and purpose undergird every part of our life. By God's providence, one episode dovetails intricately with others. It is the exact opposite of the post-modernist concepts of relativity and accident. There is nothing impersonal or mechanical about the way God leads us. He weaves it all together with consummate skill. But, like a skilful investigator, we will often have to piece together what God is saying over a particular issue until we feel comfortable to pray a particular prayer or to implement a specific policy.

In Acts 15 the disciples made the crucial decision not to impose any additional demands on Gentile believers beyond those they deemed truly necessary. This was reached after careful thought and prayer – one that felt right to both the Holy Spirit and to them. (1) Let's make this 'oneness' with the Lord our goal concerning our decision-making – not only those that relate directly to the ministry but to all of our life. God is interested in every part of our lives.

When we feel the eye of our heavenly producer drawing us to a theme or a person, we must be quick to explore and embrace it. Learn to see out of the corner of your eye, so to speak, where the Spirit of the Lord is beckoning. Such sensitivity to the Holy Spirit brings joy to our Father's heart – and turns meetings into heavenly encounters.

### 3 ~ Direct and Indirect Speech

From time to time the Lord changes the way He speaks to us. The disciples who had walked and talked with the Lord Jesus Christ had to learn a new way of relating to Him when He was no longer with them. Had the door of heaven closed on them? By no means. It simply meant that henceforth the Holy Spirit intended to communicate the will of the Lord Jesus to them in a new way.

In football referees award direct free kicks (from which you can score) and indirect ones, which require the ball to be passed to someone else first. God sometimes speaks to us directly (sure score!) – but more often He awards indirect free kicks. These ‘starter’ thoughts get us thinking and moving in the direction He has in mind, but which will require more prayer and confirmation before we can be sure of the goal, let alone see it fully achieved.

When the Lord came down in a pillar of cloud in the wilderness, He summoned Aaron and Miriam to stand before Him. What He said to them indicates that there are at least three ‘levels’ of listening: visions and dreams; riddles and face to face.

Listen to my words: When a prophet of the Lord is among you, I reveal myself to him in visions, I speak to him in dreams. But this is not true of my servant Moses; he is faithful in all my house. With him I speak face to face, clearly and not in riddles; he sees the form of the Lord. Why then were you not afraid to speak against my servant Moses? (Num 12:8) (1)

#### 3.1 Face to Face

Let’s start with the most dramatic examples. I love to read how God spoke to Moses ‘face to face’. Such encounters are specifically ordained by God. They are often associated with a specific commission – though sometimes they are given for healing or reassurance.

Think back to the ‘mountain-top’ testimonies that you have either experienced or read about. The power and glory may be to the fore, but they are given for a purpose. For example take Heidi and Rolland Baker, who is the grandson of the missionary who did such sterling work in a remote part of China helping orphans to experience the power of God. The Lord placed a burning desire within this couple to serve the least of the least and the poorest of the poor. The story of how, by faith alone, they nurtured and disciplined six thousand fellowships in that most impoverished of lands, Mozambique, is a testimony without equal of God’s saving power. But it owes its origin to how God met with them. (2)

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1 The context of the encounter quoted above was that Aaron and Miriam had been criticising Moses for having married a non-Israelite. They had dared to suggest that this made him unfit to be God’s mouthpiece. God’s reply shows how highly He rated Moses. The word ‘riddles’ is translated in the NKJV as ‘dark sayings.’

2 *There is always enough* by Rolland and Heidi Baker (Sovereign). Rolland’s grandfather wrote a book called *Visions beyond the Veil*. It is a remarkable account of visions of heaven and hell entrusted to the young orphans they sacrificially cared for and disciplined.

### 3.2 Dreams and Visions

More common than face to face experiences are those times when the Lord speaks to us at ‘one stage removed.’ He speaks to us in dreams and visions in order to impart some specific understanding or to direct us towards some specific mission.(1).

We should by no means neglect or underestimate what the Lord can achieve through dreams and visions. Many people in Islamic countries are coming to the Lord, or making specific contacts as the direct result of them. There is nothing new about this.

Captured by pirates as a young man, the young Patrick spent seven years in grim slavery in Ireland back in the fifth century. During this time that the Lord drew him back to Himself, and finally showed him in a dream how to escape the country. Later, when he had been ordained, he heard the voice of the Irish people calling to him to come and work among them. What the Lord began through a ‘rescue’ dream He took a stage further through a ‘commissioning’ vision. The result? Ireland was wonderfully evangelised!

Most of our dreams are not in this league, but they contain significant elements. At the simplest level, God gives ‘pictures’ on the screens of our mind to give us specific insight or direction. We are wise if we write these down and share them with friends or mentors.

We should take particular note of recurrent themes and symbols. The Lord often uses dreams as a ‘diagnostic’ report; they show us what is going on in our hearts, particularly if there is something that is out of balance. It is a discreet and private way for the Lord to show us something that needs adjusting or praying into.

More often than not, most of the details in the dream have no particular purpose – but they serve their purpose if they remind us of someone we should contact or pray for. Most dreams, in fact, need further clarification before we accept them as genuine guidance.

Some dreams need actively praying against. Suppose, for example, you dream of a plane crash just before you set off on a journey. Chances are, it is just the subconscious having a wobble. Rather than cancelling your ticket (unless God warns you in other ways not to embark on the journey) use it as a warning and pray that the journey will be both safe and blessed.

I have often had dreams of empty auditoriums when I am setting up conferences. Rather than pulling out of the venture, I tend to regard such ‘visions’ as warnings of what will happen if I do *not* pray.

#### For Reflection

Has God given you visions and dreams? If so what are you doing about them? There is a delicate balance between trying to bring about the fulfilment of a vision by our own efforts – which is spiritually self-defeating – and recognising the fact that many visions are never fulfilled – even if the Lord did send them– because of insufficient prayer, labour on our part.

### 3.3 “But that wasn’t what I was talking about”

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1 Gen 15:1ff; Acts 11:5ff; 16:9; 18:9; Ezek 1-3; 11:1-25; Rev 1:12; cf Acts 2:17; 2 Cor 12:1

It is always good to ask God questions – but sometimes what He shows us raises almost as many questions as it resolves. In Mark 13:2 for example, Jesus responded to His disciples' excited statement with a question. This was not a politician ducking an issue: this was Jesus leading His future leaders to consider the issues that really mattered most.

We must always be prepared to lay aside our concerns to follow His agenda and His His timetable. He *knows* what we really need to hear. Our only requirement is to obey what He shows us.

If the Lord appears to answer our questions at a tangent, He has His reasons for doing so. We must be prepared to lay aside our concerns and follow His timetable and agenda. He alone knows what we really need to hear. Our only requirement is to follow what He is showing us.

Skilled counsellors try and draw out what is really in peoples' hearts, rather than just telling them what to do or to believe.

God has so much more in mind for us than we have yet experienced. The crippled man asked for money but God had something much better to give him. Peter's faith enabled him to walk! (1)

### Prayer

Lord, teach me to trust the whispers of Your love, whether You have spoken clearly or merely hinted at something. Help me not to be discouraged when You appear slow, reluctant even, to give a straight answer to the questions I bombard You with. Thank You that we are doing the right thing in seeking You, and You not only know exactly what You need to do but also the right *order* in which to do them.

I set my heart to hear You, my will to obey You and my joy to serve You. For Jesus' sake, Amen.

### 3.4 Signs and Pointers

I once remarked that the *majority* of things God shows us about people are for us to take to Him in prayer. Perhaps that is worth clarifying. If the Lord shows me something encouraging about someone I will probably try to find a way to share it with them more or less straightaway. But if He shows me something less appealing I will want to check first of all that it is a word from the Lord rather than something conjured by my own hopes fears and imagination. After that, I will pray for the Lord to show me the parts that I must do, and the parts I should leave to Him.

The Lord often gives us insights that are signs and pointers for prayer to show us that we are on the right lines about something. The other day, I felt the Lord speaking about Britain's supplies of natural gas dwindling and about the level of consumer debt being worse than people realised. The next day I read in the paper that we will be needing to import gas from Norway and that debt has doubled in seven years to over one million pounds. These are all part of the Lord's ways of showing us where we are really up to as a nation: things that grieve Him and that are a real concern for many.

### 3.5 Understanding Dark Speech

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1 Acts 3:1-2

Jesus spoke the word to them, as much as they could understand. He did not say anything to them without using a parable. But when He was alone with His own disciples, He explained everything. (Mark 4:33-34)

What do you make of the reference to ‘riddles’ in the context of how the Lord speaks prophetically? If there is ‘clear speech’ it stands to reason that there will also be *indirect* speech. John and Paula Sandford do a splendid job of making sense of these less direct ways in which God speaks to us in their book *The Elijah Task*. They call this ‘dark speech,’ or ‘dark sayings’ after the proverb: ‘A wise man hears and will increase learning, and a man of understanding shall attain unto wise counsels; to understand a proverb and the interpretation; the words of the wise and their dark sayings.’<sup>(1)</sup>

Unlike the disciples, to whom He explained everything afterwards, Jesus taught the crowds about the Kingdom of Heaven almost exclusively by means of parables. A parable talks about one subject (such as fish, or a lost sheep) but its real meaning lies elsewhere. Without the ‘key’ it is all but impossible to understand this type of teaching. Parables are both a helpful teaching aid and a fulfilment of the Messianic prophecy. ‘I will open My mouth in a parable; I will utter dark sayings from of old.’<sup>(2)</sup> At its simplest, dark speech occurs when we think God is saying one thing to us, only to find out later that He was actually speaking about something rather different.

The Hebrew word translated ‘dark speech’ or ‘dark saying’ (chidah) literally means a ‘knot’. We often have to ‘unravel’ the things that God is saying to us.
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The way New Testament authors apply Old Testament prophecies is itself a sort of ‘dark speech’. They by no means always conform to what we would normally consider to be sound exegetical principles, often taking verses, or portions of verses, out of their context in order to illuminate something with a particular and prophetic relevance.

God uses dark speech to keep us humble and dependent. If we knew too much in advance, or could always be sure of hearing correctly, pride would puff us up. The Hebrew word translated ‘dark speech’ or ‘dark saying’ (chidah) literally means a ‘knot’. We often have to ‘unravel’ what God is saying to us. The Lord speaks as much, or as little, as He needs to get us thinking or praying in a certain direction, and then He looks for us to ‘match’ this revelation by our prompt willingness to seek Him for more understanding.

Remember how your maths teacher used to tell you that the ‘working out’ is just as important as the answer? Long ago, in the golden age of Greek philosophy, Socrates realised that people learn more by finding things out for themselves than by having all the answers spelt out for them. He developed a technique of asking people questions in such a way as to make them see the truth of a situation for themselves. This style of teaching has been known ever since as ‘Socratic’.

The concept behind Jewish teaching ran along similar lines. The Lord Jesus was concerned to help His disciples come to a fuller understanding of who He was more by pointers, parables and analogies than by direct proclamation. He used memorable illustrations that

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1 Prov 1:5-6 KJV, Ps 49:3-4)  
2 Ps 78:2

stimulated the imagination of His hearers, and prompted them to reason and understand for themselves.

When Paul says, 'Now we see dimly, as in a mirror; but then we shall see face to face,' (1) the word 'dimly' (as the RSV translates 1 Corinthians 13:12) literally means 'in a riddle', or 'in an enigma'. This ties in well with the reference to riddles in Numbers 12:8. Mirrors reverse our normal perspective. We see images that are really on the right on the left and visa versa, but we quickly learn to interpret them the right way round.

Prayer ~

Lord, help me to grasp this concept of dark speech and to follow such leadings as You give me, until the wider picture comes into focus and pulls the threads together. In Jesus' name, Amen.

In a sense, the gift of tongues is itself an example of dark speech. We use it to build ourselves up in the Lord, but most of the time we have less than no idea what mysteries we may be proclaiming, or praying for. (2)

Sometimes we strive too hard to find a literal interpretation for a vision or dream. The Lord uses 'dark speech' to show us a type, or point us in a particular direction. When God showed Paul to change the direction his mission team were going in, He gave him a vision of a Macedonian man calling to him across

the water. The man turned out to be Lydia!(1)(3) but the redirection was all-important.

The concept of dark speech may be new to you, but it is quite likely that you will have experienced it in practice. Perhaps you can recall occasions when you have felt the Lord telling you to go and visit someone, only to find that they were out. Because you were on the move, however, you were in the right place to meet someone else – which was what God had intended all along. In retrospect it is clear why you were led as you were, but it can be puzzling at the time.

In theory the Lord *could* have said, 'Go and stand outside the Post Office at 3.33 and you will bump into X' (which is what actually happened.) But He preferred to put it in your heart to go and meet Y, with the result that you just happened to be passing the Post Office in time to meet X. Similarly, the Lord does not always rebuke us openly, but may allow circumstances to work out in such a way as to bring us to a clearer understanding of a situation.

### 3.6 What do you mean 'He spoke through an angel?'

In the wilderness, God sent His angel not only to prepare the way for His people, but to give them instructions they needed to heed:

See, I am sending an angel ahead of you to guard you along the way and to bring you

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1 Cf Job 19:26-27; 1 John 3:2; Revelation 22:4

2 1 Cor 14:41, 13:9-12 I have known at least four occasions when a tongue has been recognizable as a known language. These have been precious confirmation of the work of the Holy Spirit, which have imparted invaluable wisdom. It is worth being aware that occult groups may also display this ability to speak in unknown tongues: everything needs testing, but we should most certainly seek to use and develop this gift. Jackie Pullinger urges us to spend no less than fifteen minutes each day praying in this way because it releases the power of God to flow accurately into many situations (Romans 8:26,27).

3 Acts 16:8-15



to the place I have prepared. Pay attention to him and listen to what he says. Do not rebel against him; he will not forgive your rebellion since My Name is in him. If you listen carefully to what he says and do all that I say, I will be an enemy to your enemies and will oppose those who oppose you. My angel will go ahead of you and bring you into the land of the Amorites, Hittites, Perizzites, Canaanites, Hivites and Jebusites, and I will wipe them out. (Ex 23:20-23)

What do you make of the instruction to the Israelites to listen carefully to the angel? When I first read this passage, I had some fairly hefty scruples to overcome. Considering the history of religious experience and of the devil's ability to disguise himself as an angel of light I thought it might be downright dangerous if we were all to start listening to angels. The prophet Zechariah may have enjoyed conversations with them on something approaching a regular basis, but I was only too well aware that I am not Zechariah.

How do angels spend their time? Worship-ping the Lord and then going out on specific missions. May we do as much!

As I meditated on the passage, things began to make sense. The Greek word 'angelos' means 'messenger'. After all, the Lord bestows His authority on angels to pass on His messages. In one of the most famous 'visitations', the angel revealed himself to Zacharias (the father of John the Baptist) and explained his mission. 'I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news.'

How do angels spend their time? Sometimes we find them standing before the Lord in worship, and sometimes going out from God's throne room on specific missions. Since Scripture tells us that we will one day be like the angels ourselves (1) we had better get into practice and do as much ourselves.

God did not create angels in order to make them bit part players. They are a vital part of His plans for mankind. They are mentioned nearly 300 times in the Bible, and appear to people on something like a hundred occasions. Their coming is often tantamount to the Presence of the Lord Himself (2) – and they are there to help us whenever we are about the Lord's business. May their sweet and strong presence be with you in every assignment the Lord gives you to do and enable you to have easier access to God in prayer and worship and will open doors that would otherwise remain closed forever.

### **3.7 Do *not* rely on *one* strand of guidance only**

Most of the mistakes I have made in listening to the Lord stem from rushing ahead with the first 'strong' idea I had instead of waiting for confirmation to come.

We cannot over emphasise how important this is. When we are contemplating major changes to our life or ministry, we need to be doubly sure that we are on the right lines before committing ourselves. This will usually mean waiting on the Lord for Him to authenticate the leading through several *different* strands. No matter how strong the initial guidance, we should be wary of acting on one strand alone.

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1 Mark 12:25

2 e.g. Ex 3:2-4; Josh 5:13-6:5



In Scalloway Harbour, close to where we live, three harbour lights mark the navigation channel through the cluster of offshore islands and shallows – white, green and red. If you can see two lights or more at one time it means you are off course and may be heading for danger. It is only when all three of these lights appear as *one white light* that it is safe to enter the harbour.

Did a Bible verse stand out to you? Good – but check to make sure you haven't jumped to conclusions too quickly in applying it. Did somebody (perhaps a preacher) say something that struck you forcibly? By all means respond accordingly. But again, if it relates to something life or ministry changing, wait for other signs to 'line up'. It is the same with dreams, visions, strong impressions and every other form of guidance, whether spiritual or 'circumstantial'.

## 4 ~ Develop Your Discernment

Henri Nouwen describes a particular type of bird who regularly fools people into thinking they are injured in order to draw their attention away from the eggs they have laid in open, sandy places. 'Beautiful!' he writes. 'Neurosis as a weapon! How often I have asked pity for a very unreal problem in order to pull people's attention away from what I didn't want them to see.' (1)

Have we not all done much the same thing? The gift of discernment – never to be abused – helps us to see through the smokescreens people put up and penetrate to the heart of matter.

In a world where so many 'voices' clamour for our attention, we *need* the gift of discernment desperately. But since it is only the hard training of experience, which can enable us to tell the difference between authentic listening and our own longings and imaginings, (2) let's pray for the fruit of discernment in our lives and give the matter some serious thought.

### 4.1 Recognising the Shepherd's voice

The watchman opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice. But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognize a stranger's voice.

(John 10:3-5)

In the verses immediately before this passage, Jesus highlighted the contrast between Himself and the many false messiahs who attempt to impose their control on other people. In Palestine, shepherds knew their sheep individually. Because several flocks often shared the same pen, the shepherds needed to separate their own sheep every morning. Instead of climbing into the pen and rounding them up, the shepherds would *call* their

In a world where so many 'voices' clamour for our attention, we *need* the gift of discernment.

sheep – and the entire flock would then come to him. If a stranger tried to do the same thing, God had provided a fail-safe mechanism. Not recognising his voice the sheep would stay where they were!

Would it were so simple amongst God's people, the sheep of His pasture today! When the Lord calls, some of us respond while others quibble – especially if the call involves doing something we have not done before. (3)

What the Lord says has a greater sharpness and clarity than our mind alone could ever have produced. This is because God speaks to our spirit rather than to our mind. We are left with a deep assurance that God has indeed spoken, even if we do not fully understand the

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1 Henri Nouwen, *The Genesee Diary* (DLT) p108

2 cf Hebrews 5:14

3 A man called Salik made a profound comment. He said that when the rams are looking at the shepherd, their woolly coats rub against each other companionably. But when they look at each other, they see only horns!

implications of what He has said. When we hear only our own feelings and inclinations, however, we are usually left with a feeling of uncertainty and confusion. Hearing our own imaginings (or other people's opinions) is rather like listening to a poorly tuned radio station or seeing a blurred photograph.

#### 4.2 'The Brandle Factor'

Shortly before we took charge of Brandle, a lively six week old puppy, people came to us from all directions telling us it would be 'too hard for us'. After a lot of thought and prayer we decided to welcome him into our family anyway. We have enjoyed fifteen lively years with Brandle. There have been many hairy moments – in every sense of that word – but much love and comfort too.

More times than we can count since then we have found that whenever we are about to push the boat out and attempt something new for the Lord we have faced a barrage of negatives. We have learned to nickname these discouraging comments 'The Brandle Factor'.

When is the best time to stop a plane taking off? While it is still on the ground of course!

God may have told us to do something, but there are bound to be people trotting out well-intentioned comments to tell us the opposite. Sometimes it is the enemy kicking up a fuss to stop us doing what God has in mind for us to do; at other times it is just people being overprotective or underimaginative. After all, it is not easy for others to get inside a calling that has not been given to them.

Help us, Lord, to differentiate between soul and spirit, and to know when to proceed with caution and when to advance flat out.

At other times, the best, and kindest way to view those painful occasions when other people's guidance contradicts our own is to accept that we are being warned that something really is going to be difficult – or simply needs some 'course adjustment'. That is very different from it automatically being wrong!

Paul faced 'the Brandle Factor' when his fellow team members pleaded with him not to go to Jerusalem, even though the Spirit had already shown him to do so. (1) So, from time to time, will we.

#### For Reflection

We cannot allow 'the Brandle factor' (people's negative reactions) stop us from embarking on what God is calling us to do! Equally, we are utterly unwise if we fail to heed other people's serious doubts and questions. May the Lord help us to differentiate between genuine leading, godly caution and a complete failure to recognise that God is leading us.

#### 4.3 Peace the Umpire

The peace that Christ gives is to guide you in the decisions you make; for it is to this peace that God has called you together in the one body. And be thankful. (Col 3:15)

What do you do when faced with half a dozen alternatives? Learning to sense God's leading is the most important thing! Lift the options to the Lord, and one course of action will usually stand out from the others – right choices bring peace to the soul. 'In Me you may have peace,' promised Jesus (1), and His whole life demonstrated His extraordinary ability to be at peace even in the midst of jostling crowds.

Peace is more the fruit of obedience than a goal in itself.

But peace is often a fruit of obedience rather than a goal in itself. Obeying God can lead us into conflict with the powers of darkness as well as with people of different persuasion. We would hardly expect to be drenched in peace in the midst of such opposition. At the same time, it stands to reason that we should not proceed lightly in any direction that brings no peace.

### **For Reflection**

Life is full of decisions. There is often a good, a perfect and an acceptable way ahead. Pray to get into the habit of asking the Lord to show us His *best* way forward. Ask Him to make us uneasy when we settle for second best, and to fill us with peace when we choose His way.

### **4.4 Keep in Step with the Spirit**

Paul tells us in Galatians 5:25 to keep in step with the Spirit. Back in 1976, I was present when a friend received a very special (and entirely necessary) infilling of the Holy Spirit. It happened just after I had read aloud some verses from Hosea. With the typical enthusiasm of youth I dragged another friend round a few days later, told them how wonderful it was to be filled with the Spirit and duly read aloud the verses from Hosea. You've guessed it - nothing whatsoever happened. I was probably under the impression that I had found the golden format for helping people to go deeper with the Lord!

Just as David had to wait on the Lord for the right strategy to fight each of his battles, so we must 'keep in step with His Spirit' and wait on the Lord for wisdom for each situation that we face. The Lord may often remind us of some previous experience we have been through, or some lesson we have learnt in order to point us in a particular direction. But our trust is in the Lord, not in our experiences.

### **Prayer**

Thank You that You are always doing new things, Lord. Help us to be in step with Your plans and purposes, even when You tread right off the map that we have known in the past. Forgive us when we fall into the trap of always expecting You to do things a certain way. Help us to be open to You doing something entirely different – and to trust You when You do. In Jesus' name, Amen.

### **4.5 Many visions have a shelf life**

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1 John 16:33

When we have been blessed in a particular way, it is not surprising that we want to perpetuate the blessing. Trouble is, God works in seasons and stages. There is a time for everything under the sun. If the Lord has moved on, we need to move with Him.

By no means are all visions ‘for life’. Ros and I have found that God tends to move us on (geographically) about every five to seven years. There is nothing fixed or special about this interval – it just happens to be the ‘shelf-life’ He has given many of the phases in our life. The key is to stay flexible! The goals we are seeking may not change, but the means of achieving them may need to do so. God is leading the young generation today in a radically different way from how He led us – and that wasn’t so long ago! All that matters is that we are seeking to be in step not only with His heart but also with His timing for doing what He has shown us to do.

I went to a church once where the people were only too keen to tell me how the ‘glory’ used to fall back in the 1920’s. It was good to hear their stories, but something about the way they were talking worried me. They were looking back in such a way so strongly that I felt they had no real expectation that the glory was going to come again today.

To remember what God has done in the past is fine – so long as it does not make us wistful and nostalgic, pining for times that are no more. ‘Do not say, “Why were the old days better than these?” It is not wise to ask such questions.’ (1) Far better to ask God to lead us fully into what He is doing today.

### **For Reflection**

To be in tune with the Lord’s vision for our life, means being in touch with His heart. Many things He has shown us in the past await a latter day fulfilment. But if certain other things that we have been holding on to belong to a previous phase of our life, we will find it difficult to embrace the new thing the Lord is leading us into. Make a list of all the *new* things the Lord is leading you into. Are you giving them enough time and energy?

### **4.6 Avoiding the Trammel Net of other people’s Expectations**

The more we know what God is asking us to do, the less inclined we will be to feel guilty about leaving other people to do the things that we have *not* been called to do. For lack of understanding this, many well-intentioned people end up being caught on the hook of other people’s expectations – in the spiritual equivalent of a trammel net. This three-layered net forms a pocket and traps the fish whenever they attempt to swim through it.

The more we know what God is asking us to do, the less guilty we will feel leaving other people to do the things that we have *not* been called to do.

When pastors try to be evangelists, evangelists double as pastors, and pastors freeze out prophets, the Church is in danger of getting caught in a trammel net! But when God’s people support and enable each other’s ministries, we are well on the way to becoming a mature and healthy Church – a net that holds and supports rather than a trap that ensnares.

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1 Ecc 7:10

One important principle that will help to keep us out of numerous nets is to remember that the need is not *automatically* the call. If Goliath shouts and I come running every time, he'll laugh – and I'll most likely end up with a cracked skull.

When a friend of mine recently moved to Shetland, she was beset by invitations to do this and to attend the other. She felt the Lord impressing on her clearly that she must not allow herself to become 'trammelled' into doing things that would be good and useful in their own way, but which were less than what God was really wanting from her.

The good can so easily become the enemy of the best. Only eternity will reveal how much is lost because we give in to 'the need to be needed' (which often hooks in to the dreaded fear of man). Leaders, especially, need to bear in mind that the prompting of the Spirit is more important than the demands of men. So much ultimately depends on their stewardship of time – and, conversely, on their willingness not to impose unfair expectations on those in their charge.

### **For Reflection**

It flatters our need to be needed when we are asked to do certain things, but we must learn to prayerfully assess the invitations that come our way. Whilst we may often be able to accommodate people's wishes and lend a helping hand, there is a danger of being driven by needs rather than led by the call of God.

Write down some of the things you have been invited to do on the left hand column of a page. Then write down on the other side how strongly you feel God is leading you to respond to these possibilities.

### **4.7 Listening and God's providential workings go hand in hand**

God often gives us a nudge in one direction, which, in turn, dovetails with something else that He is doing. In the course of a busy revival ministry, the Lord directed Philip to make his way to a desert stretch of road where he found a man in a chariot reading the book of Isaiah! His mission – as he quickly found out – was to come alongside this person. By worldly standards it sounds like a rather spectacular demotion: from revival preacher to a wandering nomad in one fell swoop. Actually, he was on a highly strategic mission. (1) The man Philip met is reckoned by many to have been the finance minister of Ethiopia. From this seed, not only was the first African convert made, but the ground was prepared for millions to come to know Christ in that great continent.

God's guidance often appears strange at first – foolish even. He often takes us, like Philip, away from an area where we may previously have experienced some measure of success. This is where we need active trust to believe that He knows exactly what He is doing in our lives – and why.

**Prayer**

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1 Acts 8:26f Again, we do not need to get 'hung up' on God acting so directly. If the Lord had been able to meet these two people up in a less dramatic way (for example, by having them sit next to one another on the same train to use a modern-day equivalent) He might well have done so. But there are a whole raft of things that will only happen if we wait on the Lord. That is why it is so important always to be on the alert for the still small voice. The other day, in the local leisure complex, the Lord told me to go to the swimming pool (as opposed to the gym). Sure enough, I met someone who shared something that I needed to be aware of.

Thank you, Lord, that what You call me to do today, links in with what You are doing in many other people's lives, as well as paving the way for what You will do in my life in years to come. Help me, like Philip, to be alert to come alongside specific people as You lead. In Jesus' name, Amen.

#### 4.8 Timing is all-important

If there is one issue above all that causes us problems, it is timing. It is perfectly possible to hear a call correctly, but to get the timing wrong. When the Lord speaks to us, we should never automatically assume that we know how or when He will bring what He has promised to pass – but we must continue to seek Him concerning the details. When the Lord summoned Joseph and Mary to return from their sojourn in Egypt, they must have

When the Lord speaks to us, we should not assume that we automatically know how or when He will bring what He has promised to pass.

set out eagerly – until they heard that Herod's son was now reigning on the throne. This spelt trouble with a capital T. (1) Praise God that the Lord spoke to them again at this crucial juncture and redirected their path to Nazareth, where Jesus would be brought up.

More times than I can remember I have said something like 'I feel we should go and visit X,' and Ros has said, 'Yes, let's. Tomorrow!' So far as I was concerned, I had received a nudge and assumed that we should act on it straight away. But there is a time and a place for a word to be given and a time and place for it to be worked out, and the two are not always synonymous. A true call comes from the heart of eternity, which links into GMT with perfect precision when it needs to but which *originates* in an altogether different time sphere.

I would suggest that there is often a distinction between a call (which gets us thinking and preparing in a particular direction) and the actual moment of commission, when we actually need to get moving in earnest.

#### For Reflection

When we act on a call rather than waiting for the commission we are almost bound to make mistakes and end up disappointed. Pray for the wisdom and patience to know where we are on the Lord's timescale – and then to recognise the *now* moment when we need to act.

#### 4.9 Don't be daunted by closed doors

Paul and his companions travelled throughout the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia. When they came to the border of Mysia, they tried to enter Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to. (Acts 16:6)

We have no idea how the Spirit warned the disciples not to go to Bithynia – and maybe that is just as well. We would probably 'make a doctrine out of an experience' and end up as unfulfilled as I was in my earlier example of praying for my friend to be filled with the spirit of Hosea! All that mattered was that the apostles obeyed God's warning – even though this meant heading right away from the region they had originally hoped to evangelise.

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1 Matthew 2:19-23

Despite his prayerfulness, Paul was used to doors closing in his face. Never one to make his plans lightly, he announced that he intended to go to Spain on mission. (1) So far as we know, he never made it there. Instead, he was thrown into a gloomy Roman prison, ending his days a long way away from either Spain or Jerusalem. Did he just sit and moan? Had he not set out for Spain with the most honourable of intentions? Was it not unfair that God rescued Peter from prison but showed no sign of doing the same for him?

We find not a trace of such an attitude. Paul turned his imprisonment to the best possible advantage by penning the letters to the churches that now, along with the gospels, form the backbone of the New Testament. In this way, his words reached countless millions of people through the ages: infinitely more than would have been the case had he achieved his goal and preached in the Iberian Peninsula!

### **For Reflection**

Think of some of the doors that God has shut in your life. It is hard not to feel daunted when yet another interesting one slams in your face. Nine times out of ten, however, we can look back on these experiences later on and realise what a good thing it was that they *did* close. If God had granted us what we thought we had wanted, it would either have been too much for our flesh to bear, or would have meant not getting to the ‘somewhere else’ that He had in mind for us. And the tenth time? That’s where we have to concede that we really have no idea at all. God’s wisdom is *so* much greater than ours!

### **Prayer**

Father, grant us more of Paul’s grace to adjust when doors slam shut in our faces. Grant us not just resignation but an active expectation that you can bring *more* by not opening it than if You had given us what we so badly wanted at the time. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

### **4.10 Is this open door of God?**

How do you set about obtaining guidance? Too many of us effectively leave almost everything to the matter of whether or not particular doors open. Whilst circumstances are bound to be the decisive factor in many cases, this can also be an excuse for not seeking God more actively. And what happens if a door *does* open but God does not want us to go through it? Not every open door is of God! Look at Paul, in 2 Corinthians 2:13, clearly experiencing an ‘open door’ for ministry in Troas but choosing not to stay.

In modern day parlance, we could say that the people were lapping up his ministry and paying him well. What more could he want? Why not settle down and become well known as Pastor Paul? But Paul knew that God had given him a roving apostolic call, and that at this stage of his life he was to work in partnership with Titus. Since Titus wasn’t there, Paul was prepared to forego the luxury limousine and the large congregations and to set off instead on an obstacle-strewn pilgrimage to Macedonia.

So they passed by Mysia and went down to Troas. During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, ‘Come over to Macedonia and help us.’ After Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them. (Acts 16:8-10)

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1 Romans 15:24,28



Knowing God's priorities for our life will help to keep us from second best. But be warned. It often happens that just before we embark on a difficult calling, a door will open up apparently offering us an easier course of action. May the Lord give us courage to choose the highest calling.

#### 4:11 Hearing 'beyond' our Traditions

Nobody is big enough to carry a cross and a prejudice. (Anon)

More times than we perhaps realise, we *assume* that we know what the Lord will say or do in a particular situation. Right to the end, Jesus surprised His disciples and forced them to overcome their prejudices and preconceptions. If the Lord Jesus had not checked them, they would have chased away the woman with the flow of blood, not to mention the children who beset their Master and the lepers who were the great untouchables – to say nothing of keeping the gospel from the billions of us who belong to the Gentile world!

All that God says and does will be in line with His revealed will in Scripture, but our *understanding* of His Word may be blinkered by our upbringing or by our own desires.

We will often need to go beyond the limitations of our experience and our doctrinal upbringing and *recognise* when God is speaking. All that God says and does will be in line with His revealed will in Scripture, but our understanding of His Word may be blinkered by our upbringing or by our own desires.

How hard the early Church found it to believe that God was extending His salvation and the gift of the Holy Spirit to the Gentile world. Ross Paterson describes how the Church in the eighteenth century argued that if the Lord wanted to convert the heathen, He would do so without involving us. This hopelessly limited understanding, which relegated the 'Great Commission' to something 'only for the first disciples' (1), excluded the need for missionary endeavour and sounds strange in our day of many missions. Until, that is, we remember that there are still many voices urging us to respect other faiths, even to the point of ignoring the uniqueness of Christ and His call to take the gospel to the ends of the earth.

It reminds me of the tragic mistake so many ministers and denominations are making to this day in assuming that certain gifts and empowerments of the Holy Spirit were only for the early Church.

##### **Prayer**

*Father, enlarge the scope of our listening! May neither fear nor prejudice prevent us from receiving all that You are offering. Slow us down where necessary, so that we cultivate Your presence and ask the right questions. In Jesus' name. Amen.*

All prejudices need confronting and laying down. Where would the Church be today had Paul not had the courage to stand up to Peter, urging the leaders of the Jerusalem Church to look beyond their Jewish traditions and to embrace God's mission-call to the wider world? (2)

This is a matter that requires both direct insight from the Lord and a certain amount of background information. We must seek to allow the Holy Spirit to inform our minds, rather than allowing our overly rationalistic mind to quench the Spirit.

1 *The Antioch Factor* Ross Patterson, Sovereign World

2 Gal 2:11f, Acts 15:1-29

Ros and I often say to each other when watching the news, 'What isn't being said?' Not only about the items in question but about other matters that God regards as important but which are not being reported.

To discover what is on God's heart requires cultivating this ability to think laterally. Rather than simply responding to what is already there, it is good to ask, What is lacking? What could be sharpened? When I give a draft manuscript to friends to have a look at, it is relatively easy for them to correct the spelling and grammar, or to take issue with particular points. It is asking much more of them to consider the things I have *not* included. Yet these might be precisely the points that would make the article more punchy or prophetic. Lord, please help us to see the things that we are *not* seeing or facing!

### **For Reflection**

Hidden fears and prejudices cause us to take on board things that are less than helpful. They also stop us from considering whether certain things we have taught ourselves to mistrust might in fact be right.

### **4.12 Many a slip: Mayhem and Mis-steaks!**

When Paul talks about being led by the Spirit (1) He is not saying that we will suddenly develop so accurate a hot-line to God that we will never make any mistakes – but he is speaking of living in step with the living God. It is the *Lord* who has stirred up this longing in our spirit to be close to Him – and it is He who makes it possible for us to do things we could never otherwise have dreamt of doing.

The fact is, however, that the closer we draw to the Lord, and the further we go with Him, the more we realise how little we know – and how extremely selfish and sinful we are! It is not that we are good at hearing the Lord but rather that He is so gracious to overcome our sinfulness and speak to us at all. No, we will emphatically *not* always get it right – but if we are seeking Him, the Lord will make sure that we get it right when we really need to do so. He is committed to leading His flock, and to developing our hearing.

The danger comes if our desire decreases over the years – especially if disappointments dampen our ardour. This is particularly likely if our discernment has been found to be at fault in the past. Effectively, we lose heart and are scared to try again. All of us have mistaken our assumptions and conclusions for God's and have found out the hard way that 'My ways are not your ways and My thoughts are not your thoughts.' (2)

Be encouraged:  
getting our  
hearing wrong,  
even on major  
issues, does not  
automatically  
make us false  
prophets!

Those who have been *too* keen to claim that the Lord has spoken to them when nothing of the sort has happened have done us all a disservice, by making people somewhat wary of the whole subject. The excesses reinforce old prejudices. Some pastors are terrified of the whole concept of their congregation learning to listen in case it becomes a licence for people doing their own thing.

This is an old battle! Back in the medieval days, church leaders did all

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1 Rom. 8:14

2 Isaiah 55:8-9

they could to discourage believers from having access to the Scriptures in their everyday language. They came close to success. Only immense sacrifice on the part of many has enabled us to have the translations that we now take almost for granted. Wycliffe, Tyndale . . . the list of heroes who took a courageous stand in the face of almost intolerable pressure is long. And we must not allow ourselves to be deterred, either from those times when we glean nothing (in which case we can just enjoy the Lord's company) or when we make mistakes.

Of all the books I have read on the subject of listening to the Lord, few are sharper than John and Paula Sandford's perceptive book *The Elijah Task*. The Sandfords warn us that none of us will graduate in the school of listening with our pride intact. We can take it for granted there *will* be times of disappointment and confusion when we mishear, or misinterpret what we hear. Perhaps it has to be this way for our own good. If our hearing were perfect we would become unbearably proud and complacent – and other people would be sure to look to us to be an oracle for them instead of seeking the Lord for themselves.

### **For Reflection**

How do we respond when something we had really been banking on (and had supposed to be a leading from the Lord) fails to materialise, or, even worse, blows up in our faces? Many give up listening to God at this point, blaming either themselves or God so strenuously that in extreme cases they may never fully recover.

Hey, do we really need to react that excessively? If we have got something wrong, which we often will, why be surprised? The highly fallible have been shown to be highly fallible! Whatever we do it's self-defeating to blame it all on God. There is nothing wrong with pouring out our hurt and our heart to Him; but when this develops into full-blown resentment or rebellion it becomes dangerous to the soul. Trouble is, this process tends to happen by such infinitesimal stages that we may not even notice it happening at the time.

Getting our hearing wrong, even on major issues, does not automatically make us false prophets. The best of us will sometimes try too hard to impress others, get hold of the wrong end of the stick and do all kind of goofy things. If (and that is a crucial little word) we are willing to work at these areas, and welcome the Lord's correction, no matter how or through whom it may come, then we are well on the way to becoming humble enough for God to use more powerfully. If we are truly humble, our pride cannot be hurt because we won't have a lot of it left!

But if you find that your spirit is weighed down by the memory of some hurt or failure – that is just the way the enemy wants it to be! He went to a great deal of trouble to place that weight there in the first place. But the power of God can roll dead weights away, and set the captives free. If we cannot set ourselves free, then perhaps someone who is less emotionally involved in our pain can pray it off us. To adapt the catch phrase of a well known advertisement: "The prayers of others can reach the parts our own can not!"

### **Prayer**

Lord, when I have been mistaken may I not be too proud or too stubborn to retrace my steps – for if I hang on grimly to what I mistakenly believed, I will end up bulldozing others into my lopsided way of thinking.

Help me to be willing to examine the reasons why certain things have, or have not happened, to see if they are pointing to areas where I am particularly susceptible to getting things out of balance. Free me to think and pray more fully in line with Your heart and mind. In Jesus' name, Amen.

## 5~ Listening in Times of Pressure

When the servant of the man of God got up and went out early the next morning, an army with horses and chariots had surrounded the city. 'Oh, my lord, what shall we do?' the servant asked. 'Don't be afraid,' the prophet answered. 'Those who are with us are more than those who are with them. And Elisha prayed, O Lord, open his eyes so that he may see. Then the Lord opened the servant's eyes, and he looked and saw the hills full of horses and chariots of fire all round Elisha. (2 Kings 6:15-17)

What does it take to get most of us seeking the Lord with all of our heart? How about a crisis?! Trouble is, we are only likely to be able to hear clearly in times of crises if we have been doing our best to listen to the Lord in between. It is so easy to allow fear and tension to shut out His voice to us. How, for example, would we have coped in the situation described above in Elisha's day? I have experienced considerable anxiety in the face of much less intimidating foes!

In reality, of course, God gives us grace as and when we need it, but knowing how we cope in times of pressure may offer clues and solutions. It can also be helpful to remember that men and women tend to handle things in different ways. Men commonly take refuge in doing one thing, fixatedly even, to avoid having to face certain things for the time being. In the short term this can prove beneficial. If we allow ourselves a certain amount of 'time out' in what John Gray called 'our cave,' (and Allan Pease calls 'fire-gazing') there is a good chance that we will emerge again much more prepared to listen and act appropriately. It is when we fail to emerge from these withdrawn times that the problems mount!

To continue to generalise, women tend to find it harder to escape the pressure of the moment. They feel a greater imperative to deal with an issue there and then, quite possibly because their multi-tasking brains don't easily allow them to rest from thinking about the problem. Men can watch TV or read a book and occupy the whole of their minds thereby, (thus mentally resting from their problems), whereas women can pay full attention to the book, *and* the children at the same time. But it does not make for rest!

'Worrying away' at an issue is rarely the most appropriate way to deal with it. Time and perspective are often necessary to discern the will of the Lord. Were we to find immediate solutions (or to just apologise and walk away when we have done something wrong without facing up to *why* we did something wrong) can prevent us from a fuller exploration of a subject that would have taken us to the root of the matter.

Even a cursory reading of Scripture cannot fail to show us how patient the Lord Jesus was under pressure. The depth of His composure shines through both when faced by His enemies and by crowds of people making huge demands on Him.

May our intimacy with the Lord increase to the point where we can continue to receive His specific leadings, even in the midst of intense busyness and pressure.

The Lord has not called us to a life

of doomed defeat but to endless victories in Christ. He is completely committed to us and even when we are surrounded by daunting circumstances He does not want us to despair. The Lord who began a good work in us *will* bring it to completion. (Phil. 1:6)

### For Reflection

There is nothing more reassuring than hearing God speak – although the implications of what He says will often challenge us to the limit. To keep us from becoming overly dependent on the way in which He has led us in the past, the

#### **Prayer**

*Thank you, Lord, that You are always thinking of us, always planning ahead to make things work together for good. I trust You, Lord, even when You are leading me by ways that I have not travelled before. In Jesus' name. Amen.*

Bible provides numerous examples of 'strange guidance'. Take time out to recall God's more unusual dealings in your own life. Did you initially rail and react against them? Or did you just trust that He was taking you on an adventure? How do these things look now as you view them from your present day perspective?

### 5.2 Everything God gives has to be put to the test (Mark 9:49)

Cars have their annual MOT, no ship is allowed out of the harbour until it is considered seaworthy – and aren't we grateful that surgeons have to prove their competency to practise before they are let loose on real people! It is not so different in our spiritual development.

In both Hebrew and Greek, the same word is used for 'try,' 'test' and 'tempt' (1). So when the devil is tempting us, God is testing us and our souls are being tried. Since there is no way round this process it is best if we can welcome the situations God sends that expose our shortcomings. After all, we often think we are strong when we are really only untested. How will we know if we can withstand being misrepresented, spoken against, sidelined or ignored unless the matter is put to the test? This is the work of the cross in our lives.

In His kindness, the Lord does most of His testing out of sight in secret places. Why does He do this? So that we fall flat on our noses less often in public! In private, though, we will often be acutely aware that we have flunked and failed the various tests that come our way. When we respond with anger, fear or mistrust, we can feel as gutted as I did when I failed my driving test first time round. But when I passed, it was one day I will cherish for the rest of my life! Again, it is not so different in the spiritual realm. God lets us take the tests we fail a second, third, and, if need be, a thirtieth time. He repeats various test scenarios He sends our way so that we can gain the maturity we need to handle the situation safely.

### 5.3 Light before the tunnel

Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days . . . If you do not stand firm in the faith, you will not stand at all. (Rev. 2:10; Is 7:9)

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Ros and I were on holiday in a beautiful part of the country when the Lord dropped His bombshell. He showed me clearly that we were about to go through a really difficult time, and would urgently need to keep our eyes on Him rather than on circumstances.

We have found that the Lord often seems to give us a word to hang on to (or a special sense of His presence) just before we enter some particularly difficult phase. Don't get neurotic: the Lord doesn't *only* come close when there is rough weather ahead! Neither should we blame Him when those difficult times arrive. Although the will of God sometimes leads us into the zone of maximum conflict, just as it did for the Lord Jesus Himself, there are many other occasions when the Lord knew that things were going to be difficult anyway and He is simply being gracious enough to forewarn us.

### **For Reflection**

If we can affirm the promises of God in the face of massively unpromising circumstances we will become increasingly waterproof against doubts that once threatened to dog and waterlog our spirits. It blesses the Lord so much when He sees such trust in us.

### **Prayer**

Thank You, Lord, for the reassuring steering touches that You send. You know the way that we take – and when You have refined us we will come out as pure gold. Thank You that You know all about the difficulties and dangers and are committed to bringing us safely through them.

### **5.4 Would you turn up on time?**

Guard your steps when you go to the house of God. Go near to listen rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools . . . God is in heaven and you are on earth, so let your words be few. (Ecc 5:1)

In many countries where believers are persecuted, Christians *need* to listen to the Lord for their very safety. How else will they know if it is wise to attend a particular meeting? We are sensible if we make it our goal to seek the Lord with equal determination, even without the stimulus of overt persecution.

A friend of ours was ministering some years ago behind the Iron Curtain. One afternoon he made his way to a barn in the country and found the place full to overflowing. It had been considered too dangerous to announce the details of the meeting openly, so the believers had sought the Lord and met together by 'divine appointment only'. When he asked them what they would like him to speak on, he was awed and amused when they said, 'Teach us more about listening, please - we are not very good at it!'

It seems paradoxical to speak about safety when we consider Jesus' ordeal on the cross and the sheer number of martyrs there have been for the faith. Don't get me wrong: the fact that God frequently gives His servants specific warnings to enable them to steer clear of danger does not mean that we should make a doctrine out of their experiences. Countless other believers have been arrested and martyred for their faith without for one moment having strayed outside the will of God. Was James a lesser believer than Peter because he was beheaded and Peter was miraculously delivered from prison? (1) Far from it.

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1 Acts 12

‘If anyone is to go into captivity, into captivity they will go . . . This calls for patient endurance and faithfulness on the part of the saints.’ (1)

### **5.5 Listening in extreme crises**

The Chinese word for ‘crisis’ is made up of two characters. One, predictably means ‘danger.’ The other, more intriguingly, means ‘opportunity’. Every crisis has the possibility of God intervening to do something new.

I dislike crises every bit as much as the next man. Fear and tension crowd in to shut out His voice to my soul – especially because He does not tend to say much to us anyway while we are in the thick of it. But here is a motto that will encourage you to look beyond the immediate pressures: When God is going to do something important, He allows us to see the difficulties first. But when He is going to do something really magnificent, He allows it to appear *completely* impossible!



Let's take a look at the best known of Moses' many crises. Against all the odds he had succeeded in bringing a million plus Israelites out of Egypt and into the desert. But now he was trapped, with mountains to one side, the Red Sea in front of him and the vengeful Egyptian army sweeping up behind him. How would Moses cope and God deliver? The account makes powerful reading (1) but it is the pattern that I am wanting to highlight to help us through our own times of crises. First comes the phase in which we come face to face with all the difficulties and dangers facing us. But then, as we cry out to the Lord in our distress, He reveals *His* strategy and tells us what to do. Finally, He releases His power into the situation.

### **For Reflection**

In the midst of a colossal crisis, King Jehoshaphat, looked at the Lord rather than the armies that were advancing towards him. That is very much easier said than done when the odds against surviving at all appearing overwhelming. Study Jehoshaphat's prayer in 2 Chronicles 20, and Hezekiah's in 2 Kings 19. They are masterpieces of trusting in the Lord despite the most intense pressure.

### **5.6 Scrambling the Scrambler**

For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, and against the powers of this dark world, and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. (Eph 6:12)

When people who are dealing with sensitive situations do not want anyone to intercept their communications, they activate a scrambler on their phone. This makes their words incomprehensible to any unauthorised listener. Satan, too, the father of lies,(2) is a communication scrambler. He misrepresents the nature of God to people, and the heart of people to each other. He even tries to misrepresent us before God! (3)

Condemnation is Satan's strongest weapon and his most effective tactic.

You must have known times when all is confusion in the camp. What's going on? You may well be experiencing the overflow of this cosmic battle. The powers of darkness have a vested interest in making it as difficult as they can for us to hear and understand what God is saying. After all, the better we hear from God, the more of a threat we become to the kingdom of darkness. They will do anything they can to resist the work of God and to distort what He is saying and doing.

If the battle is not external (through hostile opposition or contrary circumstances) it will be internal. The 'accuser of the brethren' shapes his shafts of condemnation to get us hearing the wrong things about ourselves (or others). He knows that if he succeeds, as he often does, it will seriously reduce our will to go forward.

Condemnation is probably Satan's strongest weapon and his most effective tactic. If he can make us feel sufficiently belittled and beleaguered, the pressure will incline us to accept the subliminal contract he suggests to our subconscious: 'I'll stop troubling you if you quit seeking God so hard!' This has to happen out of sight at the a subconscious level: if he

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1 Exodus 14

2 John 8:44

3 Zechariah 3:1-2

put it to us in so many words the chances are that we would rise up in faith and fight back. But when we feel worn down, alone and bruised, our defences are down.

Don't listen to him. Don't hold back! The very fact that there is so much warfare going on is an indication that you are known and feared in the kingdom of darkness. You pose a genuine threat to their strategies. You are in the *right* place when circumstances make the way ahead a jungle to fight through, and when the most unexpected people oppose, resist and reject you. Don't allow the sadness and dismay that you feel at being misunderstood, or even despised, stop you from doing the thing that God called you to do. Those who are trying to outwit and humiliate you are themselves in danger of being shamed and dishonoured.

### **For Reflection**

The guiding rule when under any form of pressure is not to doubt in the darkness what you have heard in the light. Press through the confusion. Use the many 'warfare' verses of Scripture (particularly the Psalms) as a shield against despair. They are there to be deployed as weapons of faith to scramble the enemy's plans. One plus God is still a majority – so fight on against the unseen opposition!

The powers of darkness may delay the angel who brings God's answer to Daniel's prayer – but the angel did win through (1). The Lord sometimes seems to take forever to respond to our prayers, but then answers many months or even years of prayer at one go. So long as you are still around, and still in the fray, God can 'turn back the battle at the gates' and use you in new ways. Tomorrow. And the day after. And every day, until He calls you home. Never give up, no matter how strong the battle.

### **5.7 Hold fast to what God has said**

Once you have committed yourself to a helter-skelter ride is not the right time to wonder if you have done the right thing! Of course we are wise if we check and double-check every leading we believe to be of God – but if we hold back when God has told us to do something it implies we do not trust Him. The powers of darkness will have much less success in tormenting us if our minds are steadfast and resolute rather than irresolute and open to all manner of doubts and misgivings.

Once you have committed yourself to a helter-skelter ride is not the right time to wonder if you have done the right thing!

Seasons of special opportunity must be seized with both hands. For example, if God stirs up someone's interest in spiritual things, we must act promptly to introduce them to the faith, lest the cults or some other distraction 'harvest' the interest that the Lord has aroused.

Far too often we are too half-hearted in what we are doing or praying. In sporting and business terms it is dedicated coaches and managers who 'win'. Again, it is not so different in the spiritual world.

When Elisha was dying, King Jehoshaphat paid him a visit. The prophet was determined to take this opportunity to bolster the king's far from fiery faith. He instructed the king to take

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1 Daniel 10:12-13

his six arrows and fire them eastwards, as a sign and symbol of his forthcoming victory over Aram. The king obeyed, but one feels that it was more out of duty than heart conviction. He ended up striking the ground three times with his arrows instead of firing off his quiver full. Elisha was grieved and angry. He declared that the king would win a measure of success but not the complete victory he could otherwise have enjoyed.

When Moses was forty, he took it on himself to help his people by rescuing a Hebrew who was being mistreated. He did so, but furtively. It is said that 'he looked this way and that way' (Exodus 2:12-15). He paid heavily for his action, enduring forty years of 'exile' as a result. But he persevered, 'as seeing one who is invisible.' (Hebrews 11:27)

This is my prayer – that each one of us may likewise persevere in seeking the Lord, in the face of all temptations to compromise or give up. May He forgive us when, for whatever reason, we fall short of the mark and miss out on what He had in mind for us. As we repent of opportunities missed, He will be gracious to allow us fresh opportunities. May we use what He has given us and never settle for second best. May our response then be that of Jesus' mother: 'Whatever He tells you to do – do it!' (John 2:5)

#### Afterword

We hope this publication has stirred your desire to listen to the Lord. If particular sections of this publication have touched, puzzled or annoyed you, why not contribute to improving it? Feel free to write to us and share insights, testimonies or corrections – we may be able to incorporate them into subsequent editions! If you wish to use any of the material in this publication we would ask that anything that is 'lifted' from it be properly attributed.

In the meantime, may we invite you to visit our web site, learn more of our work and enjoy the stunning photographs in our gallery! Write or e mail us at:

Robert Weston, Ruach (Breath of Life) Ministries,  
Glebe House,  
Military Road,  
Canterbury,  
CT1 1PA

[www.ruachministries.org](http://www.ruachministries.org)