

ARGUING WITH GOD

CALL TO WORSHIP (Deuteronomy 30:15-20)

[Moses said to the people:]

*Today I have set before you
life and prosperity, death and doom.
If you obey the commandments of the LORD, your God,
which I enjoin on you today,
loving him, and walking in his ways,
and keeping his commandments, statutes and decrees,
you will live and grow numerous,
and the LORD, your God,
will bless you in the land you are entering to occupy.
If, however, you turn away your hearts and will not listen,
but are led astray and adore and serve other gods,
I tell you now that you will certainly perish;
you will not have a long life
on the land which you are crossing the Jordan to enter and occupy.
I call heaven and earth today to witness against you:
I have set before you life and death,
the blessing and the curse.
Choose life, then,
that you and your descendants may live,
by loving the LORD, your God,
heeding his voice, and holding fast to him.
For that will mean life for you,
a long life for you to live on the land that the LORD swore
he would give to your fathers Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.*

INVOCATION

O God, your Son Jesus said that everyone who belongs to the truth listens to His voice. He never speaks on His own, but by your Spirit. By your grace and strength may we overcome every world of fear keeping us from hearing your voice from the kingdom of love. And may our every tongue be silenced until thy tongue of fire fills them from above. Amen.

SCRIPTURE READING (Genesis 18:16-33)

The men set out and looked down towards Sodom, and Abraham went with them to see them on their way. The LORD had thought to himself, "Shall I conceal from Abraham what I am about to do? He will become a great and powerful nation, and all nations on earth will wish to be blessed as he is blessed. I have singled him out so that he may charge his sons and family after him to conform to the way of the LORD and do what is right and just; thus I shall fulfill for him all that I have promised." The LORD said, "How great is the outcry over Sodom and Gomorrah! How grave their sin must be! I shall go down and see whether their deeds warrant the outcry reaching me. I must know the truth."

When the men turned and went off towards Sodom, Abraham remained standing before the LORD. Abraham drew near him and asked, "Will you really sweep away innocent and wicked together? Suppose there are fifty innocent in the city; will you really sweep it away, and not pardon the place because of the fifty innocent there? Far be it from you to do such a thing – to kill innocent and wicked together; for then the innocent would suffer with the wicked. Far be it from you! Should not the judge of all the earth do what is just?" The LORD replied, "If I find in Sodom fifty innocent, I shall pardon the whole place for their sake."

Abraham said, "May I make so bold as to speak to the LORD, I who am nothing but dust and ashes: suppose there are five short of fifty innocent? Will you destroy the whole city for the lack of five men?" "If I find forty-five there," he replied, "I shall not destroy it." Abraham spoke again, "Suppose forty can be found there?" "For the sake of the forty I shall not do it," he replied. Then Abraham said, "Let not my LORD become angry if I speak again: suppose thirty can be found there?" He answered, "If I find thirty there, I shall not do it." Abraham continued, "May I make so bold as to speak to the LORD: suppose twenty can be found there?" He replied, "For the sake of the twenty I shall not destroy it." Abraham said, "Let not my LORD become angry if I speak just once more: suppose ten can be found there?" "For the sake of the ten I shall not destroy it," said the LORD. When the LORD had finished talking to Abraham, he went away, and Abraham returned home.

ARGUING WITH GOD

Do we believe that communication with God is possible? Sure. All things with God are possible. But do we *trust* that communication with God is possible?

God made promises to bless Abraham and Sarah as individuals for the sake of every people. He directly instructed them to go forth from their home, from their relatives, and from their father's house to the land God would show them, in order to establish them and make of Abraham a great nation. (Genesis 12:1-3) God Himself appeared to Abraham's son Isaac and promised to bless him. (Genesis 26:24) God spoke directly to Isaac's son Jacob and made promises to him as well, for the sake of his father. (Genesis 28:10-15) And after he saw the burning bush, Moses heard the voice of God and became His instrument. (Exodus 3:4-17)

If we doubt the historicity of such people or the reality of their conversations with God, we would do well to remember that Our Lord Jesus appeared to the Apostle Paul and spoke directly to him. (Acts 9:3-6) Throughout Paul's life, the Holy Spirit personally instructed him in the way he should go and told him where he should *not* go. And lest we conclude that such communication is reserved only for the supposed heroes of the Body of Christ or the people of Israel, we see in several of Paul's interactions with the churches that a solid portion of their communication with one another was initiated by the Spirit's communication with each of them.

Jesus Himself heard the Father not only at His baptism but throughout His lifetime, saying in the Gospel of John, "*I have many things to speak and to judge concerning you, but he who sent me is true; and the things which I heard from him, these I speak to the world.*" (John 8:26) And on another occasion He said, "*Those who speak on their own authority seek their own glory; but the one who seeks the glory of him who sent him is true, and there is nothing false in him.*" (John 7:18)

Jesus was not speaking metaphorically here. We tend to take something literally when the metaphor offers a truth too piercing. And we tend to take something as a metaphor when the plain meaning demands of us a risk for God that we are not yet willing to take.

How many times have I spoken to others only what I have heard from the Father? Do I even have the mental coordination to do this well yet? How many times have I spoken or written only what God has instructed or at least inspired me to say? How many times have I been willing to wait to hear from the Father before I have spoken my base opinions and feelings about things? My record up to this point in my life is not as good as I would like it to be.

If I remain unwilling to wait, if I remain unwilling to let God speak to me before I speak to others, what is the point of my speaking? So that I myself can be the god who speaks through me? It is the quickest way to seek my own glory, to do my own will, and to convince others to follow *me* more than God and His plans for them.

The very definition of a satanic attack is any word spoken or deed done that does not come from the Father of Truth.

Admittedly, many people would prefer to consign everyone with whom God communicates to an asylum due to the horrendous actions of a minority who claim to have heard from God but who do things God would never tell a person to do. But we should not throw the baby out with the bathwater. We should not throw communication with God out with certain forms of mental illness. We must instead consider how equally crazy it is to believe that God is not eager to openly speak to us if we are willing to hear Him and do what He says.

Shortly after Jesus heard the voice of God say to Him, "*You are my beloved Son; in you I am well pleased,*" He was driven by the Spirit into the wilderness, where it was not long until He heard the voice of the enemy. Both Jesus and Paul and most of the early Christians were accused of being out of their minds for acting on the guidance they received from the Spirit – a guidance so prudent, it makes our every self-directed attempt to be prudent look foolish.

For most of my life, I either did not want to hear from God or I was operating under the damaging false impression that if I ever did hear from Him, I would not want to. But if I am not willing to be thought of as crazy for the sake of Christ, then I am not worth my salt. If there are people in the Bible who heard from God and did not undergo some kind of persecution because of their connection, they are not the norm.

I myself have been guilty of discounting people who heard from God, because my old nature wanted to serve the purposes of a world that doesn't care about what God says. Again, one of the primary criticisms that both Jesus and Paul and even David faced in their lifetimes was that they were out of their minds. And I am sure that each one was given a slew of punishing experiences to try and convince them that the words God spoke into their lives were not real and would only become a liability for others.

On whatever level of intimacy the communication may come, from daily bread for our bodies to daily bread for our souls, hearing from God cuts through everything else the way a sharp knife cuts through butter that's been left near the stove. Nothing can heal the alienation, nothing has power to form a person, better than the condescended words of God. Of all the ways and people God can use to reach us and influence us for our good, I now operate under the impression that God longs for the day when we are ready to hear from Him ourselves.

I once met a woman in South Carolina who went on a retreat at her church. She told me that the first thing she ever heard God say to her was "I love you." When it happened, she started weeping and trusting. The greatest question of all our hearts was finally answered for her. It completely changed her life. Just by being around her, you could sense that she was resting in God's fatherly affection for her. She knew she was valuable. She was centered and focused, and the world had fewer claims on her than it did before God spoke into her life.

What would this world look like if everyone could at least have three days to live in an environment that encouraged them to listen for God? How would such listening affect human communication and our decision-making? There is no point in getting better at what we are doing before we are clear about what God wants us to do. We become crazy when we choose to speak among ourselves before even one of us hears from the Creator.

Some say there is no such thing as an autonomous mind – that by and large what we think is shaped by forces beyond ourselves, and that whatever agency we may have over our own thoughts does not exist in a vacuum. I would agree, except for a crucial addition. There is such a *being* as the autonomous Spirit of Jesus speaking to a moldable mind. There is such a thing as the common mind of Christ that we all must put on. And whatever words are spoken,

whatever thoughts are inspired by His Spirit, and whatever actions He commands of us to witness to the “wisdom” of the world the “foolishness” of the Gospel, these are the only hopes a church has and that its people have to remain as clay in the hands of a power greater than peer pressure, greater than market norms, greater than the whims of corporate communication, greater than governmental control systems – and greater than all the principalities and powers behind them.

We are supposed to go out from this place and this faith family filled with the Spirit to act according to His will in the midst of such forces and environments, whatever the cost may be. We are not supposed to become filled with the spirit of the world so that we can come into *this* place and tell our leaders to do what the Spirit does not want so that we can feel more comfortable.

When I was in my final year of college, I had an honest conversation with my college chaplain, my mentor at the time. I told her, through tears, that I felt like a product being churned out in the image of my parents and society more than I felt like a child of God. I was on the verge of completing a 22-year-long process that, if I am being honest, felt like the wrong spirit being shoved down my throat much of the time. But at some point I took accountability for the direction I kept walking in long after others found it no longer necessary to push me along. I learned how to say no and how to walk away not only from what was oppressing my life but also from my rebellion against it – for the sake of a kingdom and a Savior who wanted to use me in His plan and His power to transform the pawns of evil into kings and queens and princes and princesses of the Most High.

Somewhere along the way, each of us will be called to pray a prayer that will completely change who we know ourselves to be. We will be called to step out in faith from everything we thought was going to happen to us and everything we thought we wanted to have happen. And each of us will be asked – and given the grace to accept or reject the call – to go somewhere or to do something no one ever expected of us, whether it be across an ocean or down the street.

God enjoys calling us out of the worlds we have come to know, every time we face the prospect of belonging to them more than to Him. The more communication we have with God ahead of time, the more strength we will have to make the faithful choice.

God has so many ways of speaking to us when we start to pay attention. Our first blush often comes from the beauty of what God has created through Christ, both in the natural world and in what humans have made at His inspiration. Our second blush can come through the people God uses and through the signs of life together in the church. And we are smitten when we are no longer just the receptive friend of someone He speaks through; we are smitten when He speaks to us Himself and makes us a better friend to His friends – friends whose words no longer appear to be just one among the many opinions we would like to entertain.

Do we believe communication with God is possible? Well, until we have mastered such a high art, we are probably not ready to argue with Him as Abraham did for Sodom.

PRAYER AND LORD'S PRAYER

May your voice, Lord God, and not our own, reign in us. You have so many ways of speaking to us. Some of the time we are afraid to hear your voice. Some of the time we need to remain in awe after we do. And other times we must admit that in our depravity, in our need to control and usurp your power, we often do not care what you have to say to us more than we prefer to speak and write on our own, seeking our own glory. We all suffer from this instinct. It hinders our desire to let your condescended words pass through and between us.

But how do we do that, Lord? How can we offer you boundless permission to act and speak, when we are not boundless? How can we wait within space and time for you to use our mouths and our tongues, our pens and our keypads for your glory? May we all have abundant grace not to step beyond or remain behind from where you are leading, to never place our hope in our own voice to create anything other than confusion, deception, or strife – so that we may be healed and in all things be of the same mind as your Son Jesus, who taught us to pray, saying, *“Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our sin as we forgive those who sin against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for Thine is the Kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever. Amen.”*