

WHISPER



by

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Sermon Notes

“Whisper” Sermon Series

Sermon Notes: 1/2

“The Bravest Prayer”

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Half a century ago, Dr. Alfred Tomatis was confronted with the most curious case of his fifty-year career as an otolaryngologist. A renowned opera singer had mysteriously lost his ability to hit certain notes even though those notes were well within his vocal range. He had been to other specialists, all of whom thought it was a vocal problem. Dr. Tomatis thought otherwise. Using a sonometer, Dr. Tomatis determined that this opera singer was producing 140-decibel sound waves at a meter’s distance. That’s louder than a military jet taking off from an aircraft carrier! That discovery led to this diagnosis: the opera singer had been deafened by the sound of his own voice. And because he couldn’t hear the note, he could no longer sing the note. In Dr. Tomatis’s words, “The voice can only reproduce what the ear can hear.” The French Academy of Medicine dubbed it the Tomatis effect. And it’s ramifications go way beyond opera. Listen, here’s my theory. All of us have problems—relational problems, emotional problems, spiritual problems. We think those problems are the problem, but I think they’re symptoms. The root cause of our problems is a spiritual Tomatis effect—ears that have been deafened to the voice of God.

It’s our own negative self-talk. God can’t get a word in edgewise! It’s the voice of criticism—you’ve heard that voice so often for so long that you can’t believe anything else about yourself. It’s the voice of conformity, the voice of culture! It’s the voice of condemnation. Listen, the enemy is called the accuser of the brethren. He’s also called the father of lies. If you listen to those lies, it’ll deafen you to the voice of God. And if you can’t hear His voice, you can’t sing His song. And your life is going to be off-key!

Let me give you a prescription for those problems: learning to discern the still small voice of God is the solution to a thousand problems! And it’s the key to discovering your identity and your destiny.

His voice is joy.
His voice is wisdom.
His voice is healing.
His voice is peace.
His voice is power.
His voice is grace.
His voice is truth.

In the beginning, God said, “Let there be light.” Those four words are still creating galaxies at the outer edges of the universe! How did God do it? He did it with His voice! The universe is God’s way of saying, “Look at what I can do with four words!” And if God can create the universe with four words, what we worried about?

The voice that spoke the universe into existence is the same that parted the Red Sea and made the Sun Stand Still. His voice can heal a withered arm or wither a barren fig tree. His voice can turn water into wine, install synaptic connections between the optic nerve and visual cortex of a blind man’s brain, and resurrect a man who was four days dead—Lazarus, come forth!

There is nothing God’s voice cannot say, cannot do. And, frankly, He can do it however He pleases! He can speak through a burning bush or Balaam’s donkey! His voice can stop a storm on the Sea of Galilee with three words—

“Peace, be still.” And that’s tough for us to even comprehend because we use our voices to basically do one thing—to speak or shout or sing. That’s it.

We think phonics, but sound waves are physics.

Most people I know would say that they’ve never heard the voice of God. And if you’re talking about the audible voice of God between 20 and 20,000 hertz, me neither. But God’s voice isn’t limited to our range of hearing. The reality is this: it’s when you get outside that range of hearing that sound waves do some strange and mysterious things. I don’t have time to talk about infrasound and ultrasound. But suffice it say, God’s ability to speak is not limited to our ability to hear audibly! God uses His voice to create and convict, to heal and reveal, to guide and to grace.

Here’s what I know for sure: God is speaking! The question: are we listening? And is God the loudest voice in our lives? If He’s not, that’s the problem. The solution is tuning in and turning up that still small voice. It’s learning these seven languages. And like any language, it takes time and effort to acquire. It took three and a half years of Spanish for me to say, “Yo hablo un poco espanol.” It’s not easy learning a language. It gonna take time. And it’s gonna take relationship. And that’s what God wants.

A few years ago, I wrote a book about prayer titled *The Circle Maker*. It’s about talking to God. But that’s half the equation. Prayer isn’t about outlining our agenda to God, it’s about getting into God’s Word and God’s presence and letting Him outline His agenda for us! So let me flip the coin. *Whisper* is about listening to God. And if you asked me which side of the prayer coin was more important, I’d say listening to God seven days a week and twice on Sunday. It turns a monologue into a dialogue. And at the end of the day, I need to hear what God has to say more than God needs to hear what I have to say.

Now let me say a few things up front.

First, if you aren’t willing to listen to everything God has to say, eventually you won’t hear anything He has to say. If you want to hear His comforting voice, you’ve got to listen to His convicting voice. I think sometimes we’re afraid of what God is going to say. Listen, you want to hear what He has to say. In fact, what you want to least is probably what you need to hear most. And I want to say this up front. These seven languages are love languages! If its not love, it’s not God. Now, it might be tough love. And it might not be what you want to hear. But you know what I’ve found. It’s what I want to hear least that sometimes I need to hear most.

The second thing I want to say is this. We live in a culture where everyone wants to be heard, but has so little to say. Listen, I hope you find your voice. But finding your voice starts with hearing the voice of God. If you want people to listen to you, listen God. Because then you’ll have something to say worth listening to. May God give you a prophetic voice, but starts with a prophetic ear!

I Kings 19:11-12

The Lord said, “Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by.” Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake came a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper.

The ESV calls it “a low whisper.” The NASB calls it “a gentle blowing.” The KJV calls it “a still small voice.”

By definition, a whisper is speaking with one’s breath rather than one’s vocal chords. And the theological significance of that is pretty profound. God breathed into the dust and formed Adam. In other words, Adam was once a whisper. So were you. So was everything else. II Timothy 3:16 says, “All Scripture is God-breathed.” The Bible is God whispering!

Hold that thought.

On the morning of August 27, 1883, ranchers in Alice Springs, Australia, heard what sounded like gunshots. The same mysterious sound was reported in fifty geographical locations spanning one-thirteenth of the globe. What those Aussies heard was the eruption of a volcano on the remote Indonesian island of Krakatoa 2,233 miles away!

That volcanic eruption, possibly the loudest sound ever measured, sent sound waves measuring 310-decibels all the way around the globe four times! It generated three-thousand-foot tidal waves, threw rocks a distance of thirty-four miles, and cracked one-foot-thick concrete three hundred miles away!

That’s the power of sound waves.

If you were to drill a hole directly through the center of the earth, opposite of Krakatoa you would find Colombia, South America. Although the sound of the eruption wasn’t audible in Colombia, there was a measurable spike in atmospheric pressure because of infrasonic sound waves that caused the air to tense. The sound may not have been *heard*, but it was *felt*, all the way around the world. According to science journalist and *New York Times* columnist Maggie Koerth-Baker, “Just because you can’t hear a sound doesn’t mean it isn’t there.” At low levels, sound is imperceptible. At high levels, it’s unignorable.

If sound exceeds 110 decibels, we experience a change in blood pressure. At 141 decibels, we become nauseous. At 145 decibels, our vision blurs because our eyeballs vibrate. At 195 decibels, our eardrums are in danger of rupturing. And death by sound waves can happen at 202 decibels.

On the opposite end of the sound spectrum, just above the absolute threshold of hearing, is a whisper. It measures 15db.

Now let me double back to I Kings 19.

We tend to dismiss the natural phenomena that precede the whisper as insignificant because it says God was not in them, but I bet they got Elijah’s attention! God has an outside voice, and He’s not afraid to use it. But when God wants to be heard, when what He has to say is too important to miss, He often speaks in a whisper just above the absolute threshold of hearing. The question is *why*. And *how*. And *when* and *where*. And I can’t answer all of those questions in this message. I touch on them in the book. But let take a stab at *why*.

When someone speaks in a whisper, you have to get very close to hear them—you have to put your ear right next to their mouth. We lean into a whisper, and that’s what God wants. We think the goal of hearing the Heavenly Father’s voice is hearing His voice. But that isn’t God’s goal. God’s goal is intimacy with us! So He speaks in a whisper. So we have to draw close to Him.

When our children were young, I’d speak in a whisper so they had to get close to me to hear me. That’s when I’d grab them and hug them. God plays the same trick on us. Yes, He wants us to hear what He has to say. But more than that, God wants us to hear His heart. To know how much He loves you.

Oswald Chambers said, “The voice of the Spirit is as gentle as a zephyr.” Aren’t you grateful for a gentle God? The Almighty could intimidate us with His outside voice, but He woos us with a whisper. And His whisper is the very breath of life.

Over the span of forty years, I prayed hundreds of times that God would heal my asthma. I honestly don’t know why He waited until July 2, 2016. That’s past my pay grade. But I want to tell you why I kept praying. It’s because of whisper.

Right before my freshman year of high school, I was hospitalized for a severe asthma attack that landed me in the intensive care unit. It was one of a dozen such hospitalizations during my younger years. In fact, I was code blue. When I was released from Edward’s Hospital a week later, Pastor Paul McGarvey and a prayer team from Calvary Church in Naperville, Illinois, came over to our house, laid hands on me, and prayed that God would heal my asthma. God answered that prayer for healing but not in the way I expected. When I woke up the next morning, I still had asthma, but all the warts on my feet had mysteriously disappeared. I’m not kidding! At first, I wondered if God had made a mistake. A little confusion between here and heaven! I couldn’t help but wonder if someone somewhere was breathing great but still had warts on their feet. I was a little confused, but that’s when I heard the still small voice of the Holy Spirit, maybe for the first time in my life. It wasn’t an audible voice; it was Spirit to spirit. But it was loud and clear. The Spirit said, “Mark, I just wanted you to know that I’m able!”

And He’s not just able; He’s “able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us.” It was that whisper that kept me praying. And for what’s worth, I dedicated *Whisper* to Paul McGarvey. The dedication says, “You prayed a prayer in August of 1984 that God answered on July 2, 2016.”

My healing was once a whisper!
And that’s true of every miracle.

As I survey my life, I realize that the genesis of every blessing, every breakthrough is a whisper—the breath of God.

Ebenzers, our coffeehouse on Capitol Hill, is a perfect example. When people walk by Ebenzers, they see a coffeehouse. I hear a whisper. That’s all it was two decades ago. It was a graffiti-covered building with cinder blocks in the doorframes. But I felt like the Spirit of God said: *This crack house would make a great coffeehouse.* That thought came out of nowhere, which sometimes indicates something supernatural. I call it a God idea, and I’d rather have one God idea than a thousand good ideas. Good ideas are good, but God ideas change the course of history.

That God idea turned into a brave prayer, which turned into a coffeehouse which has served a million customers and given a million dollars in net profits to kingdom causes! But every shot of espresso that we pull was once a whisper.

Remember the definition of a whisper? It’s speaking using one’s breath, rather one’s vocal chords.

After God healed my asthma, I made the decision to run a marathon. I felt like it was the best way to celebrate and validate that healing miracle in my life. But I also began to research respiration. And I made a discovery that somehow managed to elude me despite three seminary degrees.

I knew that according to Jewish tradition, the name for God, Yahweh, was too sacred to pronounce. But there is another tradition within Judaism, that believes that the name for God, Yahweh without the vowels—Yod, Hei, Vav, Hei—is synonymous with the sound of breathing. So on one hand, the name is too sacred to pronounce. On the other hand, it’s whispered with each and every breath we take. It’s our first word, our last word, and every word in between. We speak the name of God about 23,000 times every day! It’s in Him that we live and move and have our being. He is the breath of life!

Let me close with a challenge.

In I Samuel 3, there is a seven-word prayer that I believe can change your life. It’s like the bravest prayer that I challenged us to pray. Let me give you the context. There was a woman named Hannah who could not conceive. She begged God for a child, and God answered. She actually had five children, but the first child, Samuel, she gave back to the Lord. He basically lived at the Temple and interned under the High Priest, Eli. Scripture says he “grew up in the presence of God.” It says he “grew in favor with God and with people.” But it also says in I Samuel 3:1: “In those days the word of the Lord was rare; there were not many visions.”

Well, one night, the Lord spoke to Samuel. But Samuel had not yet learned to discern the voice of God. In fact, he mistook it for the voice of Eli. And I think we often make the same mistake. God speaks through desires and dreams and doors and people and promptings and pain. But we often misinterpret those messages. Or we ignore them altogether. Verse 7 says, “Samuel did not yet know the Lord: The word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him.” In other words, he had not learned to discern the voice of God. I think this is where some of us find ourselves. Listen, I hope you get something out of the messages we preach. But you don’t need another sermon. You need a word from God. Relying on someone else for your spiritual growth is spiritual codependency. God wants to speak to you.

This happened three times, and the wise old Eli finally figured out what was going on. God was trying to get his attention. So Eli gives him a little piece of advice. And I think it changes the trajectory of Samuel’s life. It’s a defining moment. It’s a brave prayer. Eli says to Samuel, “Go and lie down, and if he calls you, say, “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.”

God speaks and Samuel hears the voice of God for the first time. And it ends with this fascinating descriptor: “The Lord was with Samuel as he grew up, and he let none of his words fall to the ground.”

God gave Samuel a prophetic voice, but it starts with a prophetic ear. It starts with an ear that has been pierced by God. It starts with learning to discern the voice of God. Why? Because the voice can only reproduce what the ear can hear.

So here’s the challenge at the beginning of this series. Try praying the same prayer that Samuel prayed: “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.”