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CHAPTER 1:**WHAT IS GOD SAYING?**

My experience has been that God communicates to us for four main reasons. These are His favorite themes. First of all, He longs to tell us that He loves us. He wants us to comprehend how valuable we are to Him. Secondly, He wants to communicate the greatness of His power, His ability and His desire to take care of us. He wants us to have peace in knowing that He is in control. Thirdly, He wishes to guide us in our personal lives. He wants to help us make wise decisions and steer us in directions that will be best for us. Fourthly, He seeks to help direct our service to others so that we can be more effective. He knows the people who can benefit most from what we have to offer.

1. GOD WANTS TO COMMUNICATE HIS LOVE FOR US

God enjoys nothing more than to communicate His love for us. He is like a man in love who is overwhelmed all day long with thoughts of how to express his love to the one upon whom he dotes. Simply put, God is mad about us. He wants us to know that we are constantly on His mind. He wants desperately to hold us and to have us hear His whispers of “I love you.”

The Scriptures are, more than anything, God’s love letter to His beloved. My wife and I still have many of our love letters that we exchanged as we impatiently anticipated our wedding day, separated by five hundred miles. Our correspondence was full of expressions of longing to be together. God’s love for us is even more profound, and He wants so desperately for us to comprehend it.

Paul's prayer for the Ephesians was, "...that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge – that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God" (Ephesians 3:17b-19). Paul knew that even though Christians may know in their head that God loves them, as evidenced most dramatically in the death of Jesus Christ, they still have a difficult time comprehending that love in their hearts. This incomprehensible love needs to be revealed through the power of the Holy Spirit. Consequently, God seeks to communicate His love in word and deed, verbally and experientially, to every person.

The Scriptures are a good starting place. We read His letter of love for us and hear His wooing. He declares, "...you are precious and honored in my sight, and... I love you" (Is. 43:4). This love is echoed throughout the Bible. But this divine courtship is similar to human courtship in that words are not enough to adequately convince the other of the depth of the wooer's affections. Actions speak louder than words. I have encountered many Christians who comprehended very little of God's love, even though they knew the juiciest Scriptural passages that conveyed it. However, they came to understand its reality when they saw God provide for them at a difficult time, or when He gave them gifts that could only be traced to His hand.

I grew up with a very poor self-image and carried it into adulthood. As a pastor, I knew well the Biblical statements that declare God's absolute love for all, including myself. I often told others of God's unconditional love for them. The problem was that reading the verses and speaking those true words did not sink in deeply. Subconsciously I could not believe that God really loved me as I was. I did not love myself. Why would God? Consequently, I tried as hard as I could to be good and earn God's affection. The more I tried, the more I became aware of my unworthiness.

To get through to me, God used two individuals who conveyed the Lord's love through their own representation of that unconditional acceptance. The first was Mike Clair, a mature Christian who befriended me in college. He discerned my lack of peace with God, and he convinced me that I had somehow missed the good news of Jesus Christ, that He has done all to make me righteous before God. Mike's words, coupled with his unconditional love, enabled me to comprehend God's love. The second person who helped me understand the love of God has been my wife. More than anyone, she knows me. She knows my weaknesses, my sins, my failures, and the ways I have hurt her. Yet, she has always forgiven me and loved me anyway. I understand God's disposition concerning me better because I see it reflected in her.

The second way in which God has communicated His great love for me has been through generous provision and thoughtful acts that were clearly His workings. One event stands out. A few years ago the congregation I was serving had a three-day renewal event. For one of the activities of this event, we were to spend an hour in prayer each morning for three days in a row. I invited members to meet me at church to pray for our congregation's ministry.

Five people showed up the first day and we met in the basement. The next day, the heat was not working in the lower level, so we met in the sanctuary. There were four of us. During this period I was suffering from exhaustion and, as a result, some depression. I was so tired and unhappy on the third morning that I dreaded going to the church for the prayer time. I did not want to pray, did not want to be with people. I got into the car and immediately had a sense that I was going to be the only one at the church that morning. It was a gut feeling that I knew was God. I also had a sense that the reason for it was that God wanted to spend time alone with me.

Because it is easy to doubt that a feeling is from God, I prepared the sanctuary for anyone who might come for prayer. I kept the lights off and turned on the two electric candelabras that sat on the white tablecloth. Then I retreated to my office, hoping my intuition was right. When nobody had arrived fifteen minutes after the scheduled time of prayer, I knew that I would be alone. I was relieved.

A call from God to go into the sanctuary and meet with Him reached a crescendo I could not resist. It was as if He was waiting for me and whispering for me to join Him. I knew He wanted to talk with me. I finally surrendered. From the office, I entered the sanctuary in the back and headed up the aisle to the altar. As I was walking, I looked toward the chancel and my eyes went to the tablecloth on the altar and the candelabras on either side. The lights were off and the table was set, which created a mood that reminded me of a romantic setting. The only occasion, outside of Christmas, that my wife and I use a beautiful tablecloth, light candles, and turn off the lights are when one of us surprises the other with an intimate meal. I was the last to do it. I had made plans for the kids to be out of the house, put the finest tablecloth on our table, switched off the lights, lit some candles, and prepared a good meal. I wanted to surprise her when she got home. I wanted her to know that I was thinking of her and how precious she was to me. I do this for no other person.

As I walked toward the front of the church, I knew that God wanted me to make this connection. It was a profound moment for me. God had prepared the table for *me*. It was as if He was waiting for me at the altar with

an embrace of absolute delight in me as His own. I was deeply touched. I was surprised that He felt that way about me. This experience confirmed the Scriptures that told of God's immense love, and that all I had preached to others to that effect over the years was truer than I had ever dared to imagine.

I approached the communion rail and sat down where people kneel during the sacrament. I simply sat in the warm presence of the Lord and allowed His love to embrace me. I was the apple of His eye, but had not comprehended it personally. I closed my eyes and simply meditated on the awesomeness of His affection. Suddenly, a picture of the woman who had committed adultery and was brought before Jesus in the temple flashed before my mind. It was a still picture of her standing ashamed before the Lord. It was self-explanatory to me. I live with a strong self-condemnation and am sensitive to all the mistakes I make and to the sins I commit. These regrets, and the feelings of guilt that follow, have haunted my life. They have caused me to doubt God's acceptance of me. I am like the woman who had not performed well in life. I was in the temple before Jesus, ashamed and humbled, but the One who knows all my faults and transgressions looked at me in that moment and loved me in spite of myself. As I sat in His presence that September morning, He was saying to my hurting soul, "Neither do I condemn you." I finally understood that He would receive me into His presence, always. When that day had begun, it did not find me at my best. In fact, my performance for Him was poor. My attitude was awful. My heart was cool. And at that low point, He still wanted to be with me. I realized that it was me that had a difficult time accepting me, not God. He was perfectly fine with me. I was welcomed into His presence because of the performance of Jesus Christ, not my own heroics.

God's word spoke clearly of His love for me, but I needed Him to communicate it in many ways before I finally began to understand it. He spoke to me through the love of others. He spoke to me that one morning through intuition, an object lesson, a picture in my mind, and a sense of His presence. He seeks to show His love for all of us in multiple ways. He wants to share that love continually, just as men and women want to express their love daily to their spouses. As we better comprehend this incomprehensible gift, we will "be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God" (Ephesians 3:19).

2. GOD WANTS TO COMMUNICATE HIS POWER TO CARE FOR US

Throughout Scripture, God seeks to reassure His people that He is big enough to take care of them. He wants them to trust Him so that they might not lose heart. Many times, God states to people in times of crisis that they need not fear because He is with them. One beautiful example is found in Isaiah 43. This is His word to the exiled Israelites who despaired in Babylonia:

...this is what the Lord says – he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: “Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze. Do not be afraid, for I am with you....”
Isaiah 43:1-3, 5

We have a God who loves us, but we also have a God who is strong enough to hold us through any crisis. He desperately wants us to comprehend this. If we fail to grasp His ability to guide us and keep us through tribulation, we find ourselves upset, frantic and scared. At times we are tempted to despair. The point God wants to make is that we do not need to fear, although we may still worry and fret. Paul reminded the Philippians of this:

The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Philippians 4:5b-7

As with comprehending God's love, Paul makes it clear that understanding God's power is something that is beyond natural comprehension. God needs to reveal this great truth through the Holy Spirit, Who uses many means to communicate with us. The Scriptures are full of His attempts to convince people to trust in His care. It is the experiences of seeing God provide and guide through difficult times that convince us of His great power.

I rushed to the hospital a number of years ago when I heard that George Milton, a parishioner, had just had a stroke. It was later in the evening and I was not sure he would be awake. A nurse was exiting as I approached his room. Even though the room was dark, the nurse said that George was still awake. I went to the bedside where I found George on his side facing the far wall.

I did not know how the stroke had affected him and was not even sure he would be able to talk. I told him that I was going to have a quick prayer and then leave him alone. I said I would come back later to talk.

I laid my hands on his leg and prayed. He said nothing. When I saw him two days later he was sitting up in bed beaming. He told me that the day of his stroke, his left leg was the thing that had bothered him the most. He had experienced constant pain all day. He shared that immediately after I began to pray for him that night, the pain in his leg completely disappeared.

God healed George. The problem was that he was not healed totally. He still faced months of recovery and the normal consequences of a stroke. But in that miracle, God communicated to George that He was present and able to care for him. George was awakened like never before to the power of God in his life. He believed that he could trust God. Even where God had chosen not to heal or change the circumstances, George realized that God was big enough to see him through.

Many of the healings I have known about or have witnessed seem to be, more than anything, God communicating that He is strong enough to help. When an individual is graced with a healing, the fact remains that there may have been dozens of times that a healing has not occurred in that same person's life. So why that particular time? I think it is to reveal God's presence and strength, so that in the times when no quick fix is offered by God, we will still trust His working.

3. GOD WANTS TO COMMUNICATE THE BEST ROUTE FOR US TO TAKE IN PARTICULAR SITUATIONS

God wants to help us on our journey. He loves when we ask Him for direction. He knows infinitely more than we do about every situation, and He knows what would be the best route to any destination. In many cases, the Bible may not seem to be of much help because it communicates the general desires God has for our behavior, and there is no guidance for particular situations we may encounter in our particular life at a particular time. He communicates in other ways, however. A sense of peace, passion that burns deep within, counsel from a wise Christian friend, a closed door, or a thought that God gives can all reveal the best path to take.

Abraham asked God for guidance when his wife told him to kick Hagar out of the family. His servant asked for help to find the right woman in Haran for the master's son. Solomon asked for wisdom to be a good king. After the resurrection, the eleven disciples asked God to help them realize which of the two finalists should replace Judas. In each of these cases, God answered their prayers. He revealed clearly to each the best route to take. So many of the poor decisions made in the Old Testament stories were made when followers of God neglected to ask for help. God can help us take different routes from what our own bitterness, anger, self-centeredness or greed may encourage us to take. God can give us a sense of peace in our spirits if our decisions are healthy, or lack of peace when a particular decision would be poor.

4. GOD WANTS TO COMMUNICATE HOW WE CAN MOST EFFECTIVELY LOVE OTHERS

God can guide the Christian into more effective service. He knows better than anyone what each individual needs, the best timing to get that need met and the best way to meet the need. For most of the years I have been a Christian, I have assumed that I am to be busy going about the business of caring for other people. The problem is that I also assumed that I was to simply proceed on my own, giving to people in ways I thought were best. There is nothing wrong with this, but there is a better way. Instead of forcing certain acts of giving, God prefers that we wait, pray and watch for Him to open opportunities for our service.

After the resurrection the disciples were anxious to go out and share the good news about Jesus Christ, and they would have done so immediately. Instead, Jesus tells them before He ascends:

...this is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning in Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. I am going to send you what my Father had promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.

Luke 24: 46-49

CHAPTER 2:**SAFEGUARDS**

I am not unaware of the dangers of trying to hear God's voice, but I believe the benefits of doing so are worth the risks. However, it is important to list several ways that can help us to avoid the errors most often committed in this endeavor.

1. KNOW THE SCRIPTURES

If we are going to listen for God's voice from extra-Biblical sources, we need to have a good knowledge and understanding of the Scriptures. We should read and study them on a regular basis. When Jesus was tempted three times in the wilderness by Satan, it was Jesus' understanding of the Scriptures that guided Him in rejecting the enemy's voice. He quoted three verses from Deuteronomy to justify His rejection of each alluring invitation.

The Bible will have nothing to say, one way or the other, about most of the promptings of the Holy Spirit in specific situations, but once in a while it will clearly steer one away from a word that is not from the Lord. For example, let's say that I sense a strong urge to bring an apple pie over to an elderly neighbor who is all alone. I take it as a prompting of the Holy Spirit and do so. The Scriptures have nothing to say about this action that would keep me from doing it. It does, however, encourage me to think about the needs of others, be kind and generous, and care for widows, things which are accomplished by my actions. Imagine that when I am visiting with the woman I have a sense that I am supposed to tell her that God does not love her because of sins in her past. If I know anything about the Scriptures, I immediately reject this word as not being from God. According to the Bible, the Lord never bases His affections for us on our sins.

