

CONVINCED BY THE SPIRIT

The Book of Philippians #8

We are in the book of Philippians, the first chapter. For the past several weeks we have been looking at Paul's famous phrase, *"To live is Christ and to die is gain"*. Prior to that, and before our Christmas break, we looked at Paul's conviction that he would not die in a Roman prison at this time in his life but would actually be able to visit the Philippian church upon his release. We know this because he makes an extraordinary statement in verses 24 and 25:

PHILIPPIANS 1:24-26

"To remain on in the flesh is more necessary for your sake. Convinced of this, I know I will remain and continue with you all for your progress and joy in the faith, so that your proud confidence in me may abound in Christ Jesus through my coming to you again."

Somehow Paul had found the confidence that assured him he would be released from this prison and visit the Philippians again. This is indeed what occurred. He was released from prison and allowed to resume preaching. But a few years later Paul was re-imprisoned by Emperor Nero. It was during this time that Paul's perspective changed. He no longer believed he would be set free but was convinced that his days were numbered. He mentioned this in his second letter to Timothy.

2 TIMOTHY 4:6-8

"For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith; in the future there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day; and not only to me, but also to all who have loved His appearing."

This was in sharp contrast to what Paul had earlier told the Philippians. Why do you think Paul, during one imprisonment, would be "convinced" that he was not to die and was about to be released, but later, when he was re-imprisoned, became convinced that his "time of departure was near"? How could he "know" these things?

I believe the Spirit of God revealed it to him, just as the Spirit had done many times before. Paul had a history of hearing from the Holy Spirit. Let's look at a few examples of how Paul was made aware of what was to happen in his life.

You may remember the first time Paul heard from the Lord was on his way to Damascus. We read about this in Acts 9:4-6.

ACTS 9:4-6

"As (Paul) was traveling, it happened that he was approaching Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him; and he fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?' And he said, 'Who are you, Lord?' And He said, 'I am Jesus whom you are persecuting, but get up and enter the city, and it will be told you what you must do.'"

A vision appeared to Paul and within this vision a voice from heaven, the voice of Jesus Himself, spoke to Paul. Jesus told him to get up and enter the city of Damascus. Once there it would be revealed to him what he must do.

Wham. Out of the blue a voice, THE VOICE, speaks to him and gives him his first set of directions which changed the course of his life forever.

This is a story that most of us here are very familiar with. But you may also remember that when Paul went on his second missionary journey with Silas, the Holy Spirit forbade them to speak the word in Asia. And the Spirit of Jesus also would not permit them to go into Bithynia. Now what method the Spirit used to forbid them to go someplace and not permit them to go somewhere else we are not told. It could be through circumstances or it could be impressions or a lack of peace. We simply do not know. All we know is that the Spirit was actively involved in letting Paul know there were certain locations that He would not allow them to go. And His direction was unmistakable.

So they obeyed the Spirit by moving away from those areas, passed by Mysia and came down to Troas. It was there that the Spirit spoke again, this time through a vision.

ACTS 16:9-10

“A vision appeared to Paul in the night: a man of Macedonia was standing and appealing to him, and saying, ‘Come over to Macedonia and help us.’ When he had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them”

Several things happened that caused Paul, Silas and Timothy to conclude that God wanted them to do something different than what they had been attempting to do. It became obvious that God did not want them to preach the gospel in Asia, though no explanation was given. It may even have seemed contradictory to the words of Jesus when He told them to go into all the world and preach the gospel.

Yet God would not permit them to do so, at least not at this time or in these places. God had other plans which he disclosed to Paul in a very specific vision.

Before we move on there is a lesson we can learn from this event. Even though we may believe we are following the directions of Scripture - such as to go into all the world and preach the gospel – God may have something to say about where and when we are to do so. We still need God’s guidance as to how to fulfill His command, even while in the midst of wholeheartedly attempting to do so. Being convinced of God’s will is one thing. Being certain of when and how to do it is quite another. For that we need the guidance of the Spirit and a willingness to hear and redirect our energies where we are led. Keep this in mind as you attempt to obey the Spirit in your own life. Keep this in mind as you pray for the leadership of this church while they seek after God’s future plans for his ministry.

But back to Paul. We have seen that at times visions and perhaps impressions or circumstances were the methods the Lord used to speak to Paul and give him direction concerning his future endeavors. But this was not the only method the Spirit used. The Spirit spoke in other ways and through other means as well. Paul not only heard from the Lord directly he also heard the Spirit speaking through others. Here are two examples.

A man named Ananias who was told by the Spirit to go and speak to Paul while he was in Damascus. He was to lay hands on him so that he would receive back his sight. Ananias was afraid to go because Paul originally came to Damascus to kill all who followed Jesus.

ACTS 9:15-16

“But the Lord said to (Ananias), ‘Go, for (Paul) is a chosen instrument of Mine, to bear My name before the Gentiles and kings and sons of Israel; for I will show him how much he must suffer for My name’s sake. So

Ananias departed and entered the house, and after laying his hands on him said, ‘Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road by which you were coming, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.’ And immediately there fell from his eyes something like scales, and he regained his sight, and he got up and was baptized; and he took food and was strengthened.”

So the Lord fulfilled His promise to Paul by showing him directly what he must suffer for the name of Jesus. But he also spoke through Ananias by telling him he was a chosen instrument of the Lord to bear witness to the Gentiles, kings and the sons of Israel. He also spoke by the obedient actions of Ananias. After laying his hands on him, the Lord, through the power of the Holy Spirit in Ananias, gave Paul back his sight and then filled him with the Holy Spirit. He was then baptized into the kingdom of God.

Later in life the Holy Spirit impacted Paul’s life through another who was obedient to the Holy Spirit within them. The story goes like this:

Paul felt compelled to go to Jerusalem for the Passover and on his way there he stayed in the house of Phillip, the evangelist who had four daughters who were known as prophetesses. While he was there a prophet named Agabus came down from Judea specifically to speak to Paul. The Holy Spirit spoke through Agabus, telling Paul what was in store for him if he continued on his journey to Jerusalem.

This is the same Agabus who earlier, after being prompted by the Spirit, had warned that a severe famine was about to devastate the country. (Acts 11:27-28). This famine happened during the rule of Claudius. Because of his previous track record as a prophet his words were taken seriously. So when Agabus speaks directly to Paul and gives him a personal warning it is filled with authority.

ACTS 21:11

“And coming to us, (Agabus) took Paul’s belt and bound his own feet and hands, and said, ‘This is what the Holy Spirit says: ‘In this way the Jews at Jerusalem will bind the man who owns this belt and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles.’ When we had heard this, we as well as the local residents began begging (Paul) not to go up to Jerusalem.”

But Paul was not dissuaded from going to Jerusalem.

Now let me ask you something. If this was a warning from the Holy Spirit to Paul, why was he not dissuaded from going? Why didn’t he change plans to avoid this conflict? You have a legitimate prophet speaking words directly from the Holy Spirit and yet Paul was not dissuaded from going to Jerusalem. Why? If you were there with Paul, Silas, Timothy and Luke listening to this prophecy wouldn’t you take this as a sign from the Lord that you were not to go? Wouldn’t you begin to second guess your previous decisions and perhaps take this as a sign that the Spirit did not want you to go to Jerusalem? After all the Spirit had prevented them from going into Asia earlier in the year. Perhaps this was the same thing.

But Paul did not respond in this way. Paul knew something we do not. Let’s look at how he responded because his response will tell us about his mindset at the time.

ACTS 21:13-14

Then Paul answered, ‘What are you doing. Weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be bound, but even to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus.’ And since he would not be persuaded, we fell silent, remarking, ‘The will of the Lord be done.’”

Paul said that he was not only ready to be put in prison but also to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord

Jesus. This determination was nothing new to Paul but in this instance his response may have come from an earlier encounter with the Spirit of Jesus. For Paul says in his farewell address to the Ephesians:

ACTS 20:22-25

And now, behold, bound by the Spirit, I am on my way to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit solemnly testifies to me in every city, saying that bonds and afflictions await me. But I do not consider my life of any account as dear to myself, so that I may finish the course and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify solemnly of the gospel of the grace of God. And now behold, I know that all of you, among whom I went about preaching the kingdom, will no longer see my face.”

In the case of Agabus, the Spirit was repeating what Paul already knew. It was not a new revelation, but a confirmation of what awaited him in Jerusalem. Paul was not dissuaded by the threat of bonds and afflictions. The Spirit had already revealed to him that this would occur in every city to which he would go. The issue was not IF there would be persecution. That issue was already settled having been foretold to him by the Spirit. The issue was whether or not he would go in spite of persecution.

Paul had to ask himself what he valued more – a life in the flesh or a life in the Spirit. Paul chose the Spirit. He would finish the course set out for him by the Lord Himself and he would not be persuaded otherwise. Not even by a prophet of God to whom the Spirit confirmed what He had already revealed to Paul.

So we see from these few examples that Paul was not an unfamiliar listener. He heard from the Spirit in several different ways, directly and through others. And that is why I believe, while writing his letter to the Philippians, that the Spirit gave Paul the sense that he would be released from prison. I don't think it was a coincidence that Paul was released. I believe it was a fulfillment of what Paul had been told by the Holy Spirit.

And Paul was not the only one to hear from the Spirit of God. We also have other examples in Scripture. We have Simeon to whom it had been revealed by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ (Luke 2:25-26). We also have Anna the prophetess who was shown by the Spirit that the infant Jesus was the Redeemer of Israel (Acts 2:36-38). Both of these confirmations occurred when the infant Jesus was presented to the Lord in the temple at Jerusalem shortly after His birth.

Now all this is very interesting but what is the point of knowing that Paul and others heard from the Spirit? The point is this – I believe we too can be equally as sure and be as “convinced” as Paul, Ananias, Agabus, Simeon, and Anna as to what the Spirit is saying to us.

Now to be fair, some do not believe this. Some say that the “miraculous” things that happened in the New Testament were for a specific period of time. When the Scriptures were completed there was no longer any need for the Spirit to speak to men directly or to do any miraculous work through them. All God needed to say had been said through the writings placed in the New Testament. All God needed to do was done through Jesus and the Apostles. Nothing further was needed. And if any so-called “words” were heard they would be adding to Scripture which Scripture explicitly forbids (Revelation 22:18-19)

So why do I say that we can be equally as sure and “convinced” as Paul and the others were? I can say this because I believe Scripture supports it. And I believe those who believe the opposite have no solid biblical basis on which to anchor their arguments. Even those Scriptures which they do quote are often taken out of context such as the verse from Revelation. (This verse is addressed to anyone who would add to the revelation that John received and recorded in this specific book. However, it can and should be applied to all

of Scripture for Scripture is “God breathed” and is not to be added to nor are words to be subtracted from it. But his is what some fail to recognize. No one who is truly exercising their spiritual gift is attempting to add to Scripture. Scripture stands on its own and any words spoken by God’s people must be tested by Scripture to authenticate that the words are from God and not from any other source.)

The leaders of this church decided a few years back to use the words “Bible Fed, Spirit Led” as part of the church logo. Here’s why we adopted this phrase. We, like most, believe in the authority of Scripture and its ability to speak to men. This authority, this living word, is active and can result in salvation and a change of behavior. But unlike some, we also believe the Spirit speaks to us today and leads us in the path of righteousness. And here is why.

We believe Isaiah when he said:

ISAIAH 30:21

“Your ears will hear a word behind you (saying), “This is the way, walk in it,” whenever you turn to the right or to the left.”

And we believe Jesus when He said:

JOHN 10:27

“My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me.”

In fact, Jesus was so certain that we could hear His voice that He gave instructions to not worry about what we will say, for the Spirit Himself will tell us what to say. We read about this in:

LUKE 12:11-12

“When they bring you before the synagogues and the rulers and the authorities, do not worry about how or what you are to speak in your defense, or what you are to say; for the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say.”

And again in John 14:26.

JOHN 14:26

“But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said to you.

So we see that Jesus expected to speak to us and for us to be able to hear His voice. And the Holy Spirit is the instrument through which He speaks. The purpose of the Spirit is to teach and to bring to mind the things Jesus has said. And there are many ways in which the Holy Spirit speaks to us.

Besides those we have already mentioned, we could site the example of Peter having a vision of unclean things coming down from heaven which caused him to go to the house of Cornelius resulting in the salvation of that entire Gentile household (Acts 10:9-48); And Peter’s confrontation with Ananias and Sapphira over lying to the Holy Spirit about the amount of money given to the church after the sale of their land (Acts 5:1-6). Peter had no way of knowing what deception this couple had committed except through the supernatural wisdom of the Holy Spirit.

We could also speak of Phillip to whom an angel of the Lord appeared and told him to go south to the road that descends from Jerusalem to Gaza. There he met an Ethiopian eunuch whom Phillip lead to Christ.

Directly after that the Spirit of the Lord snatched him away and Phillip found himself at Azotus where he continued to preach the word of the Lord (Acts 8:26-40).

There are many modern-day examples as well especially in countries where believers are being persecuted. They speak of the Spirit closing the eyes of border guards as they bring bibles into lands that forbid them. They tell of the Spirit guiding them to secret locations where believers meet to avoid the authorities. They speak of the Spirit falling on multitudes of people as they respond to the preaching of the gospel in a dry and weary land where there has been no spiritual water.

So we see from the words of Jesus and through His working in the lives of believers, both past and present, that the Spirit is active. And His purpose is to help, to guide, to teach, to bring to mind the things of Christ, to provide words when needed, to prophecy of future events, to change lives and to change destinies. He does this by speaking to us through visions, through promptings and of course through His word.

HEBREWS 4:12

“For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.”

So we can be assured that we can hear the voice of God through His Spirit because Jesus said we would and we have examples in Scripture of those who fulfilled this word. And we can be assured that we can hear His voice through His word because it is a living and active thing which can judge the thoughts and intentions of our hearts.

So whether through His word, through visions, through guidance, revelation, discernment, or promptings, we have the ability to hear and be guided by the Spirit. And because of this, when we speak, we can speak of things that have been revealed to us by the Spirit, just as Paul did.

1 CORINTHIANS 2:7-13

“We speak God's wisdom in a mystery, the hidden wisdom which God predestined before the ages to our glory; the wisdom which none of the rulers of this age has understood; for if they had understood it they would not have crucified the Lord of glory; but just as it is written, ‘Things which eye has not seen and ear has not heard, and which have not entered the heart of man, all that God has prepared for those who love him.’ For to us God revealed them through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches all things, even the depths of God.

For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him? Even so the thoughts of God no one knows except the Spirit of God. Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, so that we may know the things freely given to us by God, which things we also speak, not in words taught by human wisdom, but in those taught by the Spirit, combining spiritual thoughts with spiritual words.

It is neither our natural mind nor our fleshly reasoning that speaks of spiritual things, because a natural man cannot accept them. They are not “naturally” appraised because they are spiritually appraised. And we too cannot hope to understand the things of God if we attempt to use human reasoning to understand them. For the scriptures say,

1 CORINTHIANS 2:14-16

“But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised. But he who is spiritual appraises all things, yet he himself is appraised by no one. For who has known the mind of the Lord, that he will instruct Him? But we have the mind of Christ.”

To “appraise” is to estimate the nature or quality of something. We appraise homes or vehicles or jewelry, etc. to determine the estimated value of the item by using the sold value of comparable items and its perceived public or private value. We trust this appraisal not to our friends and neighbors but to those who have studied and are experienced with estimating this particular item of value. This works for worldly possessions but not for spiritual values.

A natural man does not have any spiritual aptitude or ability so he cannot possibly understand the nature or quality of spiritual things. And he places no value in spiritual things because he cannot perceive or understand them. They can only be known by spiritually sensitive people. We are those people because we have the mind of Christ dwelling within us.

Another word that is used as a translation instead of the word “appraised” is the word “discern”, which means to perceive or distinguish. This is usually used when determining whether something is true or false, real or perceived, good or bad, or it may apply to the ability to determine whether the promptings we are experiencing are the promptings of the Holy Spirit, unholy spirits, or the promptings of the flesh. John cautions us not to believe every spirit but to test them to see if they truly are from God.

1 JOHN 4:1

Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world.

What this verse tells us is that not every voice we hear is the voice of the Spirit. But the Spirit within us can help us discern whether or not it is His voice, our own, or some other false spirit seeking to misdirect us.

Paul understood this and was convinced when he wrote to the Philippian church that he would be released from prison because the Spirit of God within him was revealing it to him. Just as the Spirit revealed to him when he wrote to Timothy a few years later that he would not be released from prison but would rather be released from this life and into the next.

How the Spirit revealed this to him we do not know. He does not say. We know that Paul had visions and revelations. And we know that Paul’s imprisonment was also revealed to others. But how it was revealed is not important, other than to show that the revelation of spiritual things can take many forms. What is important is that Paul was convinced in both instances of what would happen to him, in one case his release from prison and in the other his release from this life. And this same conviction, this same means of communication from God to men, is available to us.

The Spirit speaks the same way today as He always has. *“He is the same yesterday, today, and forever”* (Hebrews 13:8). Because we are His sheep, we know His voice and recognize Him when He calls to us. This is not an unusual occurrence. Believers throughout the ages have heard God’s voice and been given directions as to what to say and what to do, even of events happening in the future regarding them personally and also corporately.

I have told personal stories before of how God has communicated to me personally. God has used many different means to speak to me. He first used His word to convince me that He was the Christ and that

forgiveness of sin could be found in Him. He used Scripture again to tell me that my mother would live through her brain aneurism surgery without any negative effects. He has used several dreams to inform me that I would not be drafted into the army, that I would choose to receive eternal life, that my aunt was in heaven, and that a young man was in desperate need of my help. He gave me the words to say and brought Scripture to mind when I was doing my first real counseling session with a young man in turmoil over making wrong decisions and getting involved in the occult. He has told me that I should not pray for healing but rather for comfort as the person I was praying for would not live but would go to be with Him soon. He has given me insight into the root of a person's problem as I asked for discernment in order to help free them from their bondage.

I'm sure you could tell just as many stories as I can about how God has communicated to you. So why am I making a big deal out of this today? Why emphasize this point?

I am emphasizing this point because the world and even some in the Christian world say that we are crazy if we hear voices. And when we do hear voices we are not as discerning as we should be. Sometimes we hear what we want to hear because we are seeking not to follow God but rather to follow ourselves. We are just looking for Him to agree with us. And to some extent they are right. Sometimes the issue truly is who or what is speaking (is it my flesh, is it the Holy Spirit, or is it an evil spirit?). At other times it is who is interpreting (is my will overriding God's will so that I perceive what I want to perceive)? We must be assured that it is God who is speaking to us but we must be equally sure that God is giving us the meaning of His words.

But all of that is for naught if we don't first believe that God speaks and that we are able to hear Him when He does. Once this is established we must then seek after Him with an expectation that we will hear from Him. Many things can get in the way of hearing God's voice whether in dreams, visions, promptings or reading Scripture. Constant sinning, pride, unforgiveness, failure to repent, unteachable spirits, even an improper view of your value to God can cause your ears to stop up and your mind to shut down to God's voice. It is not that He refuses to speak it is that we refuse to listen. It is not because God does not reach out to us, it is because we continue to resist either from unbelief or from ears that have grown deaf to His voice.

God has a reputation of opening the eyes of the blind and the ears of the deaf. If you desire to hear more from God, to be able to rightly discern the voice of the Spirit from the voice of the enemy or the voice of your flesh, to be taught the ways of God and to be directed by His Spirit then pray this prayer with me now.

Father God. I confess that I have not always known if or when You have spoken. But right now I desire to hear from You. Open the eyes of my heart and mind to be able to hear Your voice, to know the depth of the love You have for me, the direction You want me to go and the decisions You want me to make this year. Help me to not only hear but to discern when the enemy is speaking and when Your Spirit is speaking. Grant me the courage to say "No" to the evil one and "Yes" to the Holy One.

And Father, give me the conviction of Paul to know that what you say to me will come to pass, whether that is life or death. May I be content with Your will and have the conviction that comes from knowing it is the Spirit of God who is revealing these things to me. And being so convinced of His voice may I boldly proclaim what I have heard, and do what I have been prompted to do. For it is not by my might or by my spirit, but by the power and Spirit of the Lord that I can do all the things which You require of me. Lord, I believe You speak and that I can hear Your voice. Help my unbelief I pray. In Jesus' name. Amen.

If you have prayed this prayer then keep your ears open and do not dismiss whatever new means of communication God will use with you. You are an individual and God knows you inside and out. He knows

how you will hear and when you will hear. It is up to Him what He speaks, when He speaks and how He speaks. Your job is simply to stay alert and pay attention, because He does speak and you will be able to recognize His voice. Even if all you say is what Samuel was instructed to say - *“Here I am Lord. Speak for your servant is listening” (1Samuel 3:10)* - then you will do well.

All of us must begin somewhere. For some it may be to simply acknowledge that God is speaking and that you are willing to listen. For others it may be tuning your ears a little closer to heavens frequency and a little less to the stations of the world so that your heavenly reception improves. But it behooves all of us to listen, for God is still speaking today and He is still seeking after those who will listen.

We really have only two choices. We can choose to be a listener or we can choose to turn a deaf ear to His voice. Which will it be for you?

Father, right now, right here I ask that You would speak to each one of us. Speak whatever words You wish to speak. Use the same words for all of us or different words to individuals it does not matter. We only wish to hear from You. Speak, Lord, for your servants are listening.