

WHY LISTEN TO GOD? ©Richard L. Smith, PhD

Deuteronomy 4:35-40 teaches a fourfold objective for listening to God voice: the knowledge of God, discipline, remembrance, and divine blessing:

- (35) To you it was shown, *that you might know that the LORD is God*; there is no other besides him.
(36) Out of heaven he let you hear his voice, *that he might discipline you*. And on earth he let you see his great fire, and you heard his words out of the midst of the fire.
(37) And because he loved your fathers and chose their offspring after them and brought you out of Egypt with his own presence, by his great power,
(38) driving out before you nations greater and mightier than you, to bring you in, to give you their land for an inheritance, as it is this day,
(39) know therefore today, and *lay it to your heart*, that the LORD is God in heaven above and on the earth beneath; there is no other.
(40) Therefore you shall keep his statutes and his commandments, which I command you today, *that it may go well with you* and with your children after you, and that you may prolong your days in the land that the LORD your God is giving you for all time."

That You Might Know that the LORD is God

The passage underscores God's sovereignty over knowledge due to our finitude and fallenness. On one hand, human beings know God only through his voluntary self-disclosure (revelation). On the other hand, mankind is both disinclined and unable to listen to the voice of God independently without grace. This passage highlights divine initiative or causation to understand God and reality: "to you it was shown," "let you hear his voice," and "let you see his great fire and hear his words." This theme is underscored in the well known assertion by Moses later in the book: "You have seen all that the Lord did before your eyes in the land of Egypt, to Pharaoh and to all his servants and to all his land, the great trials that your eyes saw, the signs, and those great wonders. But to this day the Lord has not given you a heart to understand or eyes to see or ears to hear" (29:2-4).

The God we should know, Yahweh Elōhîm, is a personal absolute and monotheistic. He is totally exceptional, for "there is no other beside him" and "there is no other." His reign is universal and transcendent in "heaven above and on the earth beneath," over all "nations," including nature and individuals. His presence "on earth" is mediated through his "great power" and he relates to all things through promise and law. He is active "on earth," "driving out" nations and supplying "the land" to Israel as an "inheritance" due to his covenantal love of the "fathers." And, of course, he is sovereign: he "chose" Abraham and his "offspring" and "gives" the land to whom he will according to his purpose.

That He Might Discipline You

A good way to understand discipline is its use in Deuteronomy 8:2-5, particularly verse 5, "as a man disciplines his son, the LORD your God disciplines you." There discipline occurs within a filial relationship meant for good, to produce holiness, resulting in blessing. Here is verse 5 in context:

- (2) And you shall remember the whole way that the LORD your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, that he might *humble you*, *testing* you to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep his commandments or not.

(3) And he humbled you and let you hunger and fed you with manna ... *that he might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD* ...

(5) Know then in your heart that, *as a man disciplines his son, the LORD your God disciplines you.*

In this setting “humbling” and “testing” (v. 2) are rough synonyms for discipline. The motive was to determine “what was in your heart, whether you would keep his commandments or not.” The object of discipline was the necessity of listening to God, specifically to “know that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD” (v. 3).

Lay it to your Heart

The verb rendered as “lay it to” in verse 39 means to “remember” or “do not forget.” This significance is similar to 11:18, “You shall therefore *lay up* these words of mine in your heart and in your soul.” This is also the sense in chapter 30, verse 1, which says, “When all these things come upon you, the blessing and the curse, which I have set before you, and you *call them to mind* among all the nations where the LORD your God has driven you.” The context indicates remembering or re-listening to God’s word motivated by repentance in the midst of chastisement.

Remembering, returning to or calling to mind the voice of God in his word is a North Star by which to navigate life and to interpret reality. One author said, “The insistence on remembering God, history and the covenant is to guard against the danger that there might be room in one’s head for a false counter-reality which would then influence one’s actual behavior for the worse.” Second, the discipline of remembering functions as a preventive strategy of the soul against apostasy and idolatry.

That it May Go Well with You

Blessing is the fruit of obedience and obedience is the correct application of listening to God’s voice. Moses told Israel, “Therefore you shall keep his statutes and his commandments, which I command you today, that it may go well with you and with your children after you, and that you may prolong your days in the land that the LORD your God is giving you for all time” (v. 40).

How well are we listening to God so that we will know him better, mature through his discipline, remembering his word, and enjoying his blessing in our lives?