

A WOMAN'S GUIDE
70

HEARING GOD'S VOICE

FINDING DIRECTION AND PEACE
THROUGH THE STRUGGLES OF LIFE

LEIGHANN McCOY



BETHANY HOUSE PUBLISHERS

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Minneapolis, Minnesota

Leighann McCoy, *A Woman's Guide to Hearing God's Voice*
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Published by Bethany House Publishers
11400 Hampshire Avenue South
Bloomington, Minnesota 55438
www.bethanyhouse.com

Bethany House Publishers is a division of
Baker Publishing Group, Grand Rapids, Michigan

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

McCoy, Leighann

A woman's guide to hearing God's voice : finding direction and peace
through the struggles of life / Leighann McCoy

p. cm.

Summary: "Speaker and Bible Study leader teaches readers how to hear and understand God's voice, specifically in the midst of struggles"—Provided by publisher.

ISBN 978-0-7642-1094-5 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Christian women—Religious life. I. Title.

BV4527.M3735 2013

248.8'43—dc23

2013007781

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Dedicated to my granddaughter

Misty Sierra Crowe

You helped me discover that God's greatest blessings
often come through the fire—
and that I was made to be a "Nana."
Keep blooming, my beautiful desert flower.

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Acknowledgments

Writing a book might seem like a personal task, but I have to confess that the books I write are more of a group project. Without the following people, this book would have never come to be.

First there is my good husband, best friend, and life partner, Tom McCoy. Since he's been my pastor for twenty-four years, most likely much of what I teach came first from what he preached. Not only that, but without his encouragement I would have never sent the first proposal to a publisher. He earned Husband of the Year for making good on the vows he took in 1987 to love me "in sickness and in health." I would not be who I am without him.

Then there are my three children who, just because they call me Mother, have given their lives to be living, breathing illustrations in my books. Mikel and Kaleigh even had to sign releases, and TJ got off easy this go-round because he charges me for the mention of his name. I never knew what ferocious love was until these three called me Mom. And I'm grateful for what they've taught and continue to teach me.

I have two other "children," and although they are new to me, their impact on my life and my journey with God has been tremendous. These two have maybe even had the most influence on the truths I'm sharing in this book. There is my son-in-law, Austin,

who is serving today in the U.S. Army and on tour in Afghanistan. And there is my beautiful granddaughter, Misty, to whom I've dedicated this book.

I am blessed to still have my parents here on earth with me, and their encouragement during these days was precious to me. I am who I am because of what they have poured into me.

Of course I also have my "book people" to thank: my manager, Ron Smith, who chooses to believe in me; and my team at Bethany House Publishers, who make my writing better and who tell the world I've got something to say: Andy McGuire, Ellen Chalifoux, and Brett Benson. I am truly grateful to each of these and the others who make my manuscript a book.

I could not go without also thanking the family of faith we call Thompson Station Church. When God called Tom and me to the dark places, they insisted on following us there. And they brought food. Over a hundred people prepared meals for my family for eight months. They prayed for us and sent us cards, text messages, and emails to encourage us every step of the way. I am so grateful to them for their ministry of encouragement. I also want to thank our pastors and ministry assistants, especially my assistant, Rhonda Brady. She kept me on track when my chemo brain threatened to derail me.

And last but certainly not least, I want to thank some of my dearest friends and prayer partners. Not only did they pray me through this project, but they also provided homemade chicken noodle soup, grapefruit juice, and companionship along the way. Terra, Kathleen, Marti, and Karen, you know that you are dear to me!

Introduction

Recently someone asked me how I was doing. I didn't answer right away. I paused long enough to ponder whether I should tell them the truth or just give them a quick, "Fine, how are you?" with a cheery smile. In an effort to maintain my integrity and yet not be caught in a thirty-minute diatribe, I grinned and said, "I'm navigating crazy, how are you doing?"

Who isn't doing that? Who has ever lived without dealing with crazy people, crazy situations, crazy thoughts, and crazy feelings?

While this book is mostly about learning to hear and respond to the voice of God, it is also about growing in your understanding that He is the same today as He was yesterday, and He will be the same tomorrow as He is today. God never changes, nor do His promises. But sometimes the struggles of life cause us to doubt that truth. This book is about taking hold of Truth and refusing to let Him go.

A Surprise on the Battlefield

While I was writing my previous book, *Spiritual Warfare for Women*, I experienced several crises in my life. When my manager, Ron, called to tell me that Bethany House had accepted my book proposal, my plane had just landed on a runway in Las Vegas. I

was there to lead a weekend retreat. Five days earlier, I woke up from a “let’s just make sure everything is okay” colonoscopy and learned that I had cancer. Two months after my cancer diagnosis, our church was flooded when torrential rain poured over mid-Tennessee. Our worship center and children’s wings sustained over \$275,000 worth of damage. And a month after the flood, my daughter moved out of our home. She took her sister out to dinner so that her boyfriend and his friends could move her furniture and belongings while she was gone. We’d left both our girls home that weekend, certain they were getting on the bus to youth camp Sunday morning. Instead of getting on that bus, Mikel moved in with her boyfriend and walked away from thousands of dollars of scholarships at a great Christian university. Two weeks later we discovered she was pregnant. About three months after that, my son was diagnosed with mono. He missed three weeks of school and still struggled with a compromised immune system a year later. A month after TJ’s mono, my husband had plastic surgery for cancer on his eyelid, and about three weeks after Tom’s surgery, my other daughter was diagnosed with the possible beginning of polycystic ovarian syndrome—the same diagnosis I suffered when I dealt with infertility twenty years ago. For years we’d been a healthy and happy family, but the year I wrote *Spiritual Warfare for Women*, we were fraught with disease and syndromes, catastrophic weather, and devastating heartache.

During those days I recognized that in spiritual warfare, there were two battlefronts—no, make that three. The first was with Satan. That didn’t surprise me, for I was writing a book about that very thing. The other was with the people and circumstances that Satan messed with. That didn’t surprise me either. But the third front surprised me. It was the powerful struggle I had with God. I was surprised by the intensity of that battle. My faith was stripped bare and I came face-to-face with a God I didn’t understand. In the book you are holding in your hands, I am sharing the things that God taught me about himself through that part of the war.

How Do I Hear God's Voice?

When my daughter Kaleigh was six, she came into my husband and my bedroom and challenged us with this question: “How do I hear God’s voice? I mean, I pray and I hear me talk to Him, but how do I know when He is talking to me?” I tried to give her the good answer I’d been given: “Most of what God has to say He’s already written in His Word.” I showed her the Bible and told her about Samuel and how he learned to listen to the voice of God. She wasn’t satisfied with my answer; she even mentioned that Samuel actually heard God speak with his own ears. I tried to explain that as she grew and read the Bible, she would learn to understand the way God spoke. Sometime later, when she was maybe eight, she came running into the kitchen and exclaimed, “Mama, I get it! I know how God speaks through the Bible! I was reading in Genesis how Cain and Abel didn’t get along with one another, and now I know that God is telling me that that is like Mikel and me: We don’t get along but I have to be nice.” When Kaleigh was eight she began making the connection—the connection between God’s Word (the Bible) and her circumstance (getting along with her sister). This is the kind of connection I learned to make as the circumstances in my life grew much worse than sibling rivalry. When we recognize the link between God’s Word and our circumstances, we grow in our ability to understand His voice.

When Kaleigh was twelve she came into my bedroom, burdened by things that I wish twelve-year-olds didn’t have to be burdened about. One of her friends had recently lost a cousin in a car accident. Another friend was cutting herself, and still another was dealing with her parents’ divorce. Kaleigh had promised the friend who was cutting that she would keep her problem a secret, but the secret was causing Kaleigh grief. With tears streaming down her cheeks, she looked at me and said, “Sometimes life just stinks.” Kaleigh was right. Sometimes life just stinks. And while this book

acknowledges that fact, I want to explore how God uses even the stinky parts of life to reveal himself to us.

Take Hold of God and Don't Let Go

I've met countless women who've let life's troubles consume their faith. Rather than take hold of God and refuse to let Him go, they walk away from God disillusioned and disappointed. Jacob is someone who grabbed hold of God and wouldn't let go. When he wrestled with God, he showed us how to secure God's blessing in the midst of confusing situations. Following his example, you can begin to live in assurance that the God who began a good work in you will be faithful to complete it (Philippians 1:6).

A Woman's Guide to Hearing God's Voice is divided into four parts. In part 1, "Wrestling With God," you will journey with Jacob and his grandfather Abraham. You already know that when disappointment arrives, it brings with it a boatload of unanswered questions that breed doubt. But do you know that those same disappointments can lead you to a wrestling match with God? And do you realize that out of that wrestling match with God you will experience tremendous blessing? Jacob wrestled when the promises of God didn't line up with the picture he'd created in his mind and the reality he was facing. In this part of the book you will learn how to allow your pictures to line up with God's promises and lead you to trust His Person.

In part 2, you will discover the answer to "Where Was God When . . . ?" Where was God when Joseph was in the pit? Where was God when Hezekiah was doing right? Where was God when the disciples were in a storm? By taking a fresh look at some great stories, you will learn to recognize God's presence in your life—whether you're in a pit, doing right, or drenched by waves.

In part 3, "Let God Define Good," you will read the true stories of women I know who have grown through disappointments,

crises, and tragedies. Part of learning to hear and respond to the voice of God is coming to places in life where God presses you beyond preconceived notions and limited faith. In this section of the book you will learn how God uses your own “crazy” to teach you new things about yourself and to reveal to you much more of His power and His love.

The final part, “God Will Make a Way,” will encourage you to live in expectation of the new thing God is doing in your life. When you live as an intimate companion to Christ, you are His witness to a watching world. As this book draws to a close, I will give you practical steps for writing your own story—a story that features the powerful presence of God and your experience of His perfect love. I will also give you ideas of ways that you might share your story with others.

This book is about being honest with yourself and with God. It’s about whipping the Enemy of your faith by allowing God to take the very things that Satan meant for your harm and giving them to God so that He can use *those* things to draw you nearer to Him and to grow you up in your understanding of Him. This book is about embracing the opportunity God gave you to pull back the curtain on the stage of your life and let God reveal himself to those watching you, because they desperately long to see God as He truly is, perfect in love and powerful in presence.

Are you eager to hear the voice of God? Are the struggles in your life drowning out His voice? Do you want God to bless you? Are you willing to hold on tight? If so, this book is for you.

Being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.

Philippians 1:6

PART ONE

Wrestling With God

I have a dear friend, Mrs. Anna. She lives in a restored farmhouse that is graced by a wraparound porch. When she entertains, everyone who sits at her dining room table eats with silver, drinks sweet tea from crystal goblets, and seasons their farm-fresh meal from little dishes that hold individual servings of salt and pepper. Mrs. Anna raises free-range chickens, grows vegetables that she gathers in baskets, and has some of the most beautiful Knock Out roses you can imagine. She's lived long enough to be wise, and one day she shared her wisdom with me.

“Leighann, there are times in our lives when we find ourselves wrestling with our angels.” She told me that her mother used to explain to her that when things were not going her way—when life wasn't making sense—it was an invitation to take hold of God's promises, wrestle with them, and never let go, just like Jacob. I love the visual image of taking hold of God, hanging on tight, and insisting that He bless me.

Wrestling with God is not a bad thing. It's impossible to wrestle with someone who is far away from you. You can only wrestle someone who is close to you. Sometimes we interpret it as failure, but I think God sees it as intimacy.

—A counselor named Chuck¹

1. Jon Acuff, “What's your favorite quote?” entry from *Ana “Jacob” Sofia, Stuff Christians Like*, accessed March 1, 2013, www.jonacuff.com/stuffchristianslike/2011/01/whats-your-favorite-quote/.

Hearing God's Voice 101

Moses approached the thick darkness where God was.

Exodus 20:21

I wish it were as easy to write this book as it is to teach a class. I wish that I could give you a syllabus, prepare lectures, and let you complete a test so that you could drink it in—*it* being the ability to hear God's voice. But *it's* not that easy. Sometimes God invites us, like He invited Moses, into the “thick darkness” and communicates with us there. That's what this book is about—going into the darkness and meeting God there. But before we head to those dark places, let's lay down some general rules about how God communicates with us.

God Usually Does Not Communicate With Us Audibly

First, God most often does not communicate with us audibly. I know, it seems a bit odd that He would give us ears—two, in fact—and expect us to use them to listen to one another when we

communicate and then choose not to put those ears to use when He communicates with us. I don't know why He does this, but He does. I've never yet heard the voice of God with my ears . . . not yet. I am open to that, but God hasn't chosen to speak to me in that way.

God Communicates With Us Through His Word

Second, God most often communicates with us through His Word, the Bible. And while the Bible itself is an ancient collection of sixty-six books, it is the inspired revelation of God as recorded through the ages. You have perhaps heard the Bible referred to as the inerrant Word of God. When people say that, they mean that they believe the Bible has been set apart by God to be the complete and perfect disclosure of himself to us. In between “In the beginning, God . . .” in Genesis 1:1 and “Amen” in Revelation 22:21, God lets us know who He is, how He interacts with mankind, and more than anything else how much He loves us. I've heard some refer to the Bible as God's collection of love letters to us.

In order to experience the difference between reading the Bible for information and reading it for inspiration, you need to have a personal relationship with God. When you enter in to a personal relationship with God (by repenting of your sins, accepting Jesus as your Savior, and determining to live your life under God's direction), you receive a marvelous gift, the gift of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit *in* you reveals truth. He takes Scripture and brings it to life. Where once you might have read a chapter or a verse and thought, *That's interesting*, the Holy Spirit will take that chapter or verse and open your mind and heart to understand how it relates to you *right where you are*. Then you will read it and think, *That's for me!*

You Must Read the Bible in Order to Hear God Speak

Because God most often communicates through His Word, you need to read it. It doesn't matter how living and active God's Word might be; if you don't take time to read the Bible, you won't benefit from the power of it. When you read the Bible, it is good to read for information, to learn more about God—but also to read for inspiration, to experience more of God.

What is the difference? When you read for information, you might read the Bible much like you would a history book, taking note of dates and names, places and time periods. It is good to understand the cultures that set the context for the biblical writers. As you read for information, you grow in your understanding of God's character and His ways. This helps you to discern His voice when He speaks to you.

When you read the Bible for inspiration, you approach a particular passage of Scripture with this prayer on your lips: “Lord, I need to hear a word from you today. Please, speak to me through your Word; help me to hear and to understand what you are saying to me.” When you make a habit of reading God's Word on a daily basis, and you pray that prayer, you will experience the power of God's Word. The words you read will jump off the pages of the book into your heart and mind. Then you will say, “God spoke this to me in His Word today. . . .”

Obey God's Word If You Want to Hear His Voice

You must be willing to obey God's instructions (as presented in His Word) in order to hear His voice. God tells you what to do, and then He waits patiently for your obedience before He says anything else. Many people suffer the silence of God because they refuse to respond to the prompting of His Spirit. There is a whole lot of mystery surrounding the activity of the Holy Spirit.

Don't get confused by Him. God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Each aspect of His Person reaches into our lives to draw us into a personal relationship with Him. God the Father sent His Son to provide us with this relationship. The Holy Spirit comes to abide (or live) in us when we enter into a relationship with God. It is the Holy Spirit who speaks to us when we read God's Word. The Holy Spirit guides us into truth.

Many years ago my daughter Mikel asked Jesus into her heart and followed her decision with baptism. She was six years old. At the time I wondered if she truly understood what she was doing, but I didn't stand in the way because I kept hearing the voice of Jesus when He told His disciples, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these" (Mark 10:14). When Mikel was in sixth grade she confided in me that she thought God wanted her to be baptized again because she didn't fully understand what she was doing when she was six. I encouraged her to be baptized, but she was too afraid of what others would think, so she didn't do it. She made me promise not to tell her father, and I chose not to press the issue. I trusted that what she was dealing with was between her and God, not her and me and God.

A few years passed and Mikel was fifteen. She was having a difficult time juggling her friendships, softball, and school. One afternoon she cried as she shared her frustration, stress, and confusion with me. I encouraged her to pray and talk with God about these things. She responded to my urging with this: "Mom, I've tried to do that, but God doesn't talk to me like He talks to you. It just doesn't work for me."

Her words broke my heart, and I knew they were not true. God doesn't choose to be real to one person and not to another. Something was amiss. So I asked Mikel, "When was the last time you know you heard God's voice?" She looked at me with tears streaming down her cheeks and said, "You know." I didn't know, I'd forgotten. But then I remembered—I remembered the

day she'd told me that she thought she needed to be baptized because she understood better what it meant to accept Jesus as Savior and Lord. I also knew that Mikel had chosen to ignore that prompting of the Spirit of God for several years. So this is what I said: "Mikel, many times God tells us something that He wants us to do. Then He waits. He waits to see if we will obey Him. And if we do, He tells us something else. When we choose to obey His voice, we know He's there and He walks with us through the confusing stuff life throws our way. But if we don't obey Him, He remains silent. We're kind of on our own until we choose to obey Him."

Mikel understood. Two weeks later, at fifteen years old, she was baptized by her weeping father. Mikel wanted to hear God's voice, so she chose to obey His Word. She obeyed in spite of her fear, in spite of her embarrassment, and in spite of what other people might think. In fact, she invited her friends and her softball team to come and witness her baptism. We celebrated with family, friends, and teammates at a barbecue after church. I don't think I've ever been prouder of her than when she stood in the baptismal waters that day.

God Communicates With Us Through Other People

God communicates with us through other believers. When Jesus came to walk on earth, He chose twelve men to be His disciples. Those men walked and talked and lived with Jesus for three years. Through that experience, eleven of them started a movement that continues to impact the world today. Through those men Jesus built the church. Right after Jesus ascended into heaven, His followers stood there staring into the sky. Two angels appeared to those disciples and questioned the value of their star gazing, so they returned to Jerusalem. When they got back to Jerusalem, they gathered together in a room to pray. Can you imagine what it might

have been like to be in that room? Acts 1:15 tells us that there were about 120 men and women present at the prayer meeting.

I don't know how long the disciples prayed, but Peter stood up among them and spoke to them. He led the people to choose a replacement for Judas the traitor (Matthias was the one they chose). God spoke to His disciples through Peter. Ever since that day God has chosen men and women to speak His Word. Our pastors do this every Sunday when they stand in their pulpits and discuss God's Word. We do this with one another when we share a verse or a word of encouragement with a friend.

I've often been impressed with God's method of repeating himself when He speaks through others. I will read something in my quiet time and know that it is a "word" for me. How will I know? Allow me to explain. Let's say my heart is heavy because my daughter is unhappy at college. I'll be reading the Psalms and come across Psalm 37:3-4:

Trust in the Lord and do good; dwell in the land and enjoy safe pasture. Take delight in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart.

I will smile when I read that because my daughter is walking with God. She reads her Bible, prays, and seeks godly companions to encourage her along the way. I know that she's trusting God, and I know that she's "doing good," and therefore I am confident that God will give her the desires of her heart. I pray for her and, if I'm really a good mom, I'll jot her a note and put it in the mail. Later that same day I might be listening to the radio when a recording artist will share how God used Psalm 37:4 in his life during a difficult season. I'll smile to myself as I drive north on Highway 31 and know that God is speaking to me. Then, at lunch I'll be talking to a friend about what's going on in her life, and she might mention Psalm 37:4 again. Has that ever happened to you? When it does, you will know that you are hearing God's voice!

God Communicates Through Praise and Worship

The sixth general rule is that God speaks through praise and worship. I've seen men and women sit in our worship services at Thompson Station Church and literally cry through the entire service because their hearts are so hungry for a word from God. Their tears are tears of release and relief. At our church we worship God. Our choir and band don't perform, they lead in worship. And as we lift our voices (and sometimes our hands), the presence of God fills the worship center. Scripture says that God inhabits the praises of His people (Psalm 22:3 KJV).

There was one Sunday when our pastor (who is my husband) stood silently while the choir hummed behind him. He was being still and listening rather than speaking. In the silence, different people across the congregation spontaneously began to share Scripture aloud. Their voices could be heard first to the left, then to the right, and somewhere in the back center of the room. Our education pastor's son pulled on his daddy's arm and whispered in his ear, "Is that God speaking?" Pastor Louis told his son that in a way it was! God's people were speaking God's Word aloud in the room, and through that experience of worship we were hearing the voice of God.

God Sometimes Communicates With Us Through Visions

The Bible records several stories of God communicating with individuals through visions. Sometimes those visions came in the form of dreams (as in Joseph and Pharaoh's case), and sometimes they seemed to be actual experiences (as in the case of some of the prophets). In Joel 2:28 we are told that young men will see visions and old men will dream dreams. Although this is not a common way that God chooses to communicate with me, He has given me

both visions and dreams on very rare occasions. I share a few of these experiences in my book *Oh God, Please Help Me With My Doubt* (Worthy Publishers). You will read about one of my visions later in this book.

Be sure to realize that when God speaks to you through visions and/or dreams, His message will always line up with His Word.

You Will Not Hear God's Voice Unless You Cultivate an Attitude of Gratitude

The eighth general rule, and this will be the final one, is this: You will not hear the voice of God apart from cultivating an attitude of gratitude in your life. If you go through life always looking at your glass half empty, you will miss the ability to hear God speak. Paul warned the believers in Rome of this hindrance to hearing the voice of God.

For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened.

Romans 1:21

When you get to a place in your life where you fail to acknowledge God's goodness toward you—when you get too busy, or too burdened, or too full of pride to thank Him for His faithfulness and His love—you will find it hard to hear His voice. Later in Romans 1, Paul went on to say that those same people who “neither glorified God nor gave thanks to him” were given over by God to the sinful desires of their hearts. “They exchanged the truth about God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator” (Romans 1:25). Eventually they participated in unnatural desires (specifically homosexuality). They were eaten up with envy, greed, and depravity. Their culture was filled with murder, strife, deceit, and malice. They were slanderers, gossips,

and God-haters who were insolent, arrogant, and boastful. They invented ways of doing evil; they disobeyed their parents; they were senseless, faithless, heartless, and ruthless. (See Romans 1:21–32.) And it all began with a failure to glorify (worship) God and give Him thanks. You will not hear God's voice without cultivating an attitude of gratitude in your life.

Approaching God in the Darkness

Those are the general rules regarding hearing God's voice. If I were preparing a class on hearing the voice of God, those eight things would be what I would teach:

1. God usually does not communicate with us audibly.
2. God communicates with us through His Word (the Bible).
3. You have to read the Bible to hear God speak.
4. You must be willing to obey His instructions to hear Him speak.
5. God communicates with us through other believers.
6. God speaks through praise and worship.
7. God sometimes speaks through dreams and visions.
8. You must cultivate an attitude of gratitude in your life in order to hear God's voice.

In the rest of this book I want to show you how God communicates with us in the darkness. The verse I chose to open this chapter was Exodus 20:21, "Moses approached the thick darkness where God was."

Sometimes the circumstances of life create a thick darkness. Because we tend to be afraid of what we cannot see, our natural response to darkness is to flee. But because God was *in* the darkness, and Moses wanted to hear His voice, he boldly approached the darkness. My hope is that as you read this book, you will become

like Moses and eagerly approach the thick darkness, knowing that God is there.

A few years ago I felt like the darkness surrounding me was swallowing me alive. I took my heavy heart (and my husband) to our prayer clinic. The prayer clinic at Thompson Station Church is a place where people come for prayer—much like a medical clinic is a place people go when they are sick. Our prayer clinic is staffed with men and women who have the gift of intercession. The entire army of intercessors surrounded us in prayer.

During that prayer time, my sweet friend Julie began to pray an interesting prayer. It went something like this: “Oh, gracious Father, we know that you love our pastor and his wife. We know that nothing can come against them that hasn’t first been brought before your throne. And although this situation they are in today is breaking their hearts, we believe that you have allowed it because you want to take them with you into the deep, dark, and secret places where your most valuable treasures are hidden. As you lead them in the dark, Lord, make them aware of your presence. And don’t let their own suffering stop them from collecting every single treasure you have for them there.”

Hers was a prayer that went deeper than my comfort and joy. Part of me wanted to scream, “No, God! I don’t want those things no matter how precious they might be.” You see, I don’t like bats, and I don’t like spiders, and I don’t like those creepy-crawly things that slink along on a bazillion little legs. I don’t like to slosh in muddy water where I can’t see my toes and it’s cold and damp and dark. I’d just as soon not go there. But the part of me that surrendered all that I was to all that I understood God to be when I was eleven years old at a girls’ camp in the north Georgia mountains knew that if God was taking me into the deep, dark places where He kept His most valuable treasures, then I was going every step of the way with Him.

I’ve been spiritually spelunking for a couple years now. And I’ve collected a few treasures along the way. It’s those gems I’ve

uncovered that I want to polish with you now. From this point forward I want you to embrace these eight “givens” about hearing God’s voice, and then come with me as we approach the thick darkness where God is.

Treasure Hunt

This is a great book to study with a small group of friends. Simply read the chapters on your own, then reflect on the questions listed at the end of each chapter. When you get together, answer the discussion questions, share insights from God’s Word, and pray together. Consider memorizing the “treasure verse” and collecting the precious jewels. A fun activity might be to make a bracelet or a necklace to commemorate the journey that you take with one another.

Personal Reflection

- Review the eight general rules. Which way does God most often speak to you?
- What part of the “thick darkness” scares you? Consider admitting your fear and asking God to give you courage to go wherever He wants you to go as you walk with Him.

Discussion Questions

1. Share a time when you “heard” the voice of God while reading the Bible.
2. Share a time when your obedience (or lack of) affected your ability to hear the voice of God.
3. Are you facing the “thick darkness”? If you are, share the darkness you are facing and invite your friends to pray for you as you move ahead in your treasure hunt.

4. Take turns offering quick prayers of thanksgiving for the many ways that God has blessed you this week. (By doing this you are cultivating an attitude of gratitude.)

Treasure Verse

Moses approached the thick darkness where God was.

Exodus 20:21