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How Should I Pray About Big Decisions If I Can't Expect a Confirmation from God?

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#STRask - Stand to Reason

Questions about how we should pray about big decisions if we can't expect to hear a "yes" or "no" from God, what Greg means by "listening prayer," and why he thinks the call of Samuel in 1 Samuel 3 isn't an example of it.

* In light of Greg's teaching on decision making and the will of God, when I'm making a big decision and I'm told to "pray about it," what does that mean if I shouldn't expect to hear a "yes" or "no" from God?

* What do you mean by "listening prayer," and why do you think the call of Samuel in 1 Samuel 3 isn't an example of it?

Transcript

Welcome, this is Stand to Reason's hashtag STRS podcast with Amy Hall and Greg Kockel. And today, Greg, we have questions about hearing the voice of God. We do come back to this every once in a while.

We get a lot of questions about this because this is an area where you kind of stand out among other people because not a lot of people are saying what you're saying. The irony though, I mean, in a certain sense, there are lots of people who hold a view that I hold, but they're not as -- in a certain sense, the view that I hold turns out to be generally silent in the Body of Christ. Those who hold the other view that you develop an ability to hear the voice of God are not as silent because you hear them talking about hearing the voice of God, with the other side doesn't say that kind of stuff.

So it gives the impression that there are more of these kind of people than there are, but it is a huge number of people. So before I even get into the questions, I just want to mention on our website, we have a series of three articles called Does God Whisper? There are three parts. So if anything in this episode you don't understand or you take objection to or whatever it is, go

ahead and read through those.

They're not too long and they might answer a lot of your questions or at least help you kind of make sense with what Greg's saying because sometimes the first time you hear these things it can be kind of a surprise and so you don't maybe hear it exactly the way that you're really saying it. So I'm very careful how I put my words with people just hear much more than I say and incidentally those articles are specifically written to assess the meaning of verses that people will use as proof text for this notion whether it's in decision-making or the still small voice that kind of mentality and all I'm trying to do is look at the passage in its context and show what the passage means and it doesn't mean what people think it means when they are simply quoting it on the fly and most of these are not controversial when you look more closely so that's what they'll get when they find when they take a look at those pieces. So we have questions about a few passages today but we'll see how far we get.

So you've got a few questions. Alright this first one comes from Chris Martins. In light of Greg's teaching on decision-making and the will of God when I'm making a life slash family decision to buy a house or car etc and I'm told to pray about it what does this mean? I feel I'm expected to hear a yes or no or get some kind of confirmation either way.

Thoughts? Yeah that's that's what we're praying about or what we ought to be praying about and what's interesting to me I can say that with some conviction because you don't see those kinds of prayers being prayed in the New Testament you see them being prayed occasionally in the Old Testament but it's always in unique circumstances where anointed leaders are involved. Kings making decisions and the reason that God gave the law initially is to provide guidance for the kings and the well the prophets are basically law enforcers for the leadership of the nation to know what to do under different circumstances okay and and even wisdom when Solomon was was offered the opportunity to get get something from God. Notice that God appeared to him in a vision and and God says what would you have me give you? Solomon said give me wisdom so that I'll be able to lead these people.

Now if what God if the the Mo the modus operandi of God regarding his people making decisions about lots of things was just that he would tell them that would make people mere order takers okay just tell me what to do okay I'll do that and anybody can take orders but what wisdom is is the right use of knowledge it's insight it's the ability to see the circumstances and to draw appropriate lines of action given the set of circumstances so this is a misunderstanding actually we had a question about it recently where somebody cited the book of James pray for wisdom and their the presumption is all wisdom is is an answer telling them what to do that's not what wisdom is wisdom and is insight that allows you to make the good answer okay and so this is what we see throughout the Old Testament we do not see this circumstance where okay I've got this decision you tell me what to do God we don't see that at all that requires no spiritual growth of any kind okay in the New Testament we have something entirely different we're we're to grow in wisdom and in knowledge and and we're to grow in our understanding of God's ways and grow in with in godliness and all of these are thin and our understanding of

the word and all of these things in aggregate help form our decisions so when it comes to the issue I think Chris was did she mention marriage as an example right or where no he says when I'm making decision about life or family or to buy house a car it's okay okay well that those are general thing but in in the Kate oftentimes marriage is one of them well Paul gives instruction about marriage in first Corinthians 7 as a whole chapter about the decision of whether to get married or not and he never says ask God he tells you hear the prose here the cons here are the liabilities of each and hear the moral obligations applying to either singleness or being married if you're single you can have sex if you're married you can't get divorced for example and the Proverbs has more information too about what's smart you know a given marriage it says they're like a like a gold ring in the snout of a pig it's a beautiful woman woman without discretion okay is a sin to marry a beautiful woman without discretion no it's dumb you get the gold ring but the pig comes with it and this is the instruction of Solomon to his own son so I'm just giving these examples of how scriptural elements are ones we take into considerations when we make the decisions that God has given us to make whether it's marriage or buying a car or a word of a school or where to live or anything like that now where does the prayer come in the prayer comes in as an attitude of surrender to God and a request for help to assess the challenges that you have and some I should say the decision that you're facing now sometimes the prayer is for a kind of provision all right so if a young man is not married and he wants to be married I don't think the right prayer is tell me who I should marry because there is no justification for that kind of prayer anywhere in scripture and some people want to heart back to Abraham so they got to go back four thousand years for an example of a father choosing a wife for his son so at best what you have there an example is a rearranged marriage well then they kind of spiritualize it well this is a holy spirit sending this holy I'm sorry it's the father sending the Holy Spirit to find a mate that's what God does for us there is no justification for making that kind of metaphor and you see nothing like that the rest of scripture and with regards to that decision so that's misdirected what we pray for is we pray for wisdom we pray for insight we pray for opportunity so if you're praying about being married I had a fairly clear idea of the kind of woman I thought would be good for me and I prayed for that kind of woman that the Lord would bring that woman into my life that that I would have the wisdom to see those qualities in a woman that would best suit a wise choice for marriage there are moral obligations that apply to you know if you're gonna get married you have to marry a Christian you can't be unequally yoked and by the way that's a moral obligation but it's also smart if you're in full-time ministry you don't marry a new Christian because you don't know if they got staying power that's a wisdom issue now we're gonna get that wisdom some from the text I've just described a lot of you're gonna get from other Christians so this requires that we interact with other Christians to lay out where we're at what we're faced with and get counsel from them of course it takes prayer to ask it to request of God that we get we are given good counsel and that we are able to separate the meat from the bones because not all the counsel we get is going to be sound so there's plenty of things to pray about the thing you don't pray about is the thing you are not told to pray about or told to expect you don't ask God to make the decision for you and incidentally there are people who do this on a regular basis but then the question is how do you know when God answers that scripturally when God intervened it's invert almost

every circumstance it's a supernatural intervention I mentioned Solomon had a vision Joseph had a vision regarding Mary and then another dream regarding escaping Herod so there's directives that God gave directly but it wasn't a nudge nudge hint hint kind of thing which is almost exclusively the way people think that God is telling them what to do I'm feeling led I've had confirmation I have a piece about it you know it's cetera cetera and in the pieces you mentioned has God spoke or rather does God whisper I look at all those passages and show that these are not going to help you in this because that's not what the writers were talking about so the prayer is going to be for lots of different things and sometimes we don't always know the best way to pray and this is where the Holy Spirit comes in for us Romans 8 so we trust God in that and we ask for wisdom and we ask for insight we ask for provision regarding specific things and I mean I know friends that just you know are out of work now out of nowhere bam out of work I'm praying for them what am I saying they're praying for themselves Lord give me opportunity and then when the opportunities come up then they have to be assessed are these good opportunities or are they not good opportunities all things considered and that requires wisdom as well so all of these decisions could be wrapped in prayer with all kinds of requests for God's help without saying God let's just cut to the chase tell me what to do this is too much work this is too hard I gotta have too many people I gotta oh man just tell me what to do that's kind of the way people you have to remember that God's greatest goal for us is to make us like Christ it's not to give us this perfect life or to have us do certain specific things it's all about shaping us so why would he just give us if you were just giving us a yes or a no that would say my what's most important is where you move in life what job you take what car you buy but it's not it's who we are and that's why he wants us to mature through learning how to be wise and how to be discerning so again like I would pray for I pray for wisdom I pray that if there's there's that God would bring to light all the information I need for this for this decision that if there's something hidden that I need to know that he would bring that to light that I would get good wisdom from others that he that would be able to see things as they actually are and not be swayed by either mistaken ideas or sinful ideas or whatever it is that I would care about the right things as I'm making my decision that so all the you like you said there are a lot of things to pray for and just remember your your future is about God making you like Christ that's the most important thing so it's not like you're going to make some decision and your entire your entire life will be off the rails and you've made this horrible decision you can't come back from and now you're in plan B yeah you've given up God's best or whatever it is that people say so interesting I learned this many many years ago when I was a fairly new Christian from John MacArthur a great talk that he gave about decision making in the will of God or found that God's will is the title of this piece and he made the observation that when you look in the New Testament for and you you the language of the will of God you don't find that language applied to particular decisions about things like most people are asking God about for example for this is the will of God for you there's the phrase even your sanctification that you abstain from sexual immorality oh well that's a character thing okay that's in first thus foreign first as five says give thanks and all things for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus oh be thankful okay it talks about do not in Ephesians for do not be drunk with wine but be filled with the spirit for this is God's will for you oh so we're supposed to be spirit filled you know so there

and he goes to a number of the most of them start with us so it's nice and convenient but the point he's making is is God's will is not a job that you same one you made job you you're going to get a place to live with a degree to pursue a person to marry God's will is you and the kind of person you're becoming and being in that circumstance the job the marriage etc and we can rest knowing that we are not going to mess up God's plan I think a lot of people have this again this fear that if they make the wrong decision everything is just ruined marry the wrong person for example or but yet we can't we can't mess up God's plan if God wants us to be somewhere we will end up there so don't worry about that just work on being godly in whatever situation you're in because that's what's important just a case in point very quickly because I know we have to move on but most people consider standard reason the enterprise is a reasonably productive enterprise 31 years now we have a large team of people making a contribution in the lives of so many others there has never been a single time where I ever felt led in the sense that people talk about it heard the Lord's voice or anything like that regarding anything having to do a standard reason now I can clearly see God's hand orchestrating everything not just the last 31 years since our inception but all kinds of things that took place beforehand that God brought together to make this enterprise possible and fruitful God sovereign hand God to your point Amy God can work out his sovereign purposes just fine without having the Holy Spirit sit on our shoulder and whisper in our ear so let's go to a question from Philip and in some of this maybe we've already covered but here's his question hi in a recent podcast Greg suggested that listening prayer wasn't found in the Bible I wondered if Greg could define what he means by listening prayer and why the call of Samuel in 1 Samuel 3 isn't an example of it oh okay very familiar with that passage but the reason I say well let me back up first question what is listening prayer and that's easy to figure out by reading anybody's writing on it who is the guy who wrote the book he's the pastor at Willow Creek in Illinois which book are you talking about it with the pastor of Willow Creek oh sorry Greg so soon we forget he was one of the biggest pastors in the country absolute megachurch anyway but he wrote a book that had a chapter in it about listening prayer okay Bill Hybels oh okay yeah you're losing it just like I'm not really my circle anyway Bill Hybels wrote I have the book and then there's a chapter on listening prayer and the idea is very simple prayer is communication which I agree and then there's another step what is communication communication is two-way alright maybe thirdly if communication is two-way then when I communicate to God in prayer then he has to communicate with me well maybe and if I'm talking to him that's the mode of communication then the mode of communication he would have with me is talking back to me so what I do is I pray or we should pray and we say our side and then we stop and we listen for God to say his side and that's called listening prayer okay another a number of things wrong with that for one well let's just start prayer is communication yes of course we are communicating with God our needs and desires and whatever and we are told to do that communication is not always two-way though I'm driving down the freeway and I see an ad on the freeway they're communicating to me about the ad I'm not communicating back to them so communication could be one way secondly if we think of communication in relationships at least as to being two-way then what is wrong doesn't God's word qualify as the other side of communication if that's the mode we're thinking of so I communicate with God sharing my things and then I read his word to learn

what he has communicated for all of his people and how he's worked in the lives of his people so I can understand his ways and maybe even modify my prayer when I see you pray and do not receive because you use it to spend it on your you know you've whatever your your foolish things James says your wants or your desires or something like that so boy that's one reason I don't hear your prayer because you have sin that you're not dealing with in your life of Psalm 32 or whatever so oh wow that gives us information God speaking there that's why we call it God's word now for some people it's not as satisfying because it's nice if we just have a chat but we are presuming something about God then that God himself has not decided to do with us are there conversational relationships in scripture occasionally very rare and it's not characteristic of the rank and file in fact virtually every time we have a detail of a conversation God is having with someone which is akin to the kind of conversations we think about I say he says I say he says kind of thing instead of a nudge nudge hint I think God is telling me to go to Asia or something like that no God gives a directive he talks I was just reading it the other day in Genesis 18 it says God appears in a vision and he says and they talked and then he responded and it's a conversation that God is having with Abraham at the Oaks of memory for example so that is straightforward that's the obvious way to read it and that's what happens and once in a while it does happen but it's very rare and it's unique and it's generally in a very unique set of circumstances okay and so we see that God can do it every once but I'm just looking at the patterns we don't see any kind of intimation of what people would characterize as listening prayer I'm not sure if it was the discipleship group you were in with me in my home many years ago or another group before that but the whole group went through the entire New Testament we divided it up into sections and we are trying to figure out what does the New Testament teach on prayer and since we divided up in sections the point was to read through and isolate those verses that had to do with prayer even if they didn't have the word prayer in them so the coordinates isn't going to serve the purpose of getting all of the references and so we put together the all that we learned and we made an outline of it and it's available on our website it says New Testament on prayer and you can see the whole outline we put together there's not a single verse that says anything about listening prayer none so how is it that a very prominent pastor in this country writes a book on prayer and has a whole chapter on listening prayer to which there's not a bit of biblical just for which there's not a bit of biblical justification now if you listen if you go quiet and listen I promise you're gonna hear something if nothing else than the workings of your own mind the difficulty is if you're told to do that and then you go quiet and then something comes to mind the temptation is to assign that thought that comes to mind with divine authority and it's just not justified but it happens a lot and it creates a pastoral, pastoral problem for pastors with people who are convinced God told them to do something that they're not that doesn't seem to be what God has said all right so there is a counter example okay well what about first Samuel now I've heard this claim so many times little Samuel he's in the the temple and he hears God speak and and then he thinks of course it's not Samuel he thinks it's Eli who is the priest and he's serving Eli as a boy and and so there's that interaction there and I've heard this characterized in different ways as if Eli is teaching Samuel to recognize the voice of God the idea being God is speaking but we don't recognize his voice we have to learn by somebody who knows how to recognize it how to recognize the voice

of God and this is a strong part of the teaching of say Dallas Willard or JP Moreland on this particular issue now in these I mean I have lots of love for JP we're very close we differ on this point but this is one of the ways they will characterize it the problem is I figured I'm just got to figure this one out and I did something significant I went back to first Samuel and started in chapter one verse one and I went to the last verse and verse of chapter three I read every single verse to get the entire account and it turns out that there's no listening prayer that's going on here little Samuel who's hearing from God didn't initiate a prayer and he's listening to try to hear God speaks on his own initiative audibly and he speaks audibly and he speaks we know it's audible because Samuel thinks it's Eli calling him now Eli's not a godly man the only time we know that God talked to Eli was through a prophet who put a curse on his family for sin and his family and Eli doesn't even get it a couple of times Samuel comes to him he sends him back to bed and finally he comes to a sense as he thinks oh something else is going on here and so he tells Eli to ask when he hears it the third time speak Lord your servant is listening or something to that effect and instead of when God speaks he doesn't run into Eli he just asks God to finish his concern so he's no problem he doesn't have to learn to hear Eli is not teaching him to hear and Eli there's no reason to believe that Eli has ever heard from God okay so nothing in this historical account matches the characterization that is offered by people who use this to support this view in fact there's no evidence that Eli is a genuine godly man a believer okay he's under a curse and it says in the text that even Samuel doesn't know the Lord he's not a believer he's just a kid and the text says also in those chapters that words from the Lord were rare in those days so what do you have here you got God initiating an interaction with a boy who turns out to be the first great prophet of Israel Samuel and he's the one of course that anoints Saul and then anoints David and and I mean Samuel's amazing what's interesting at the end of it when he finally hears from God then Samuels I mean Eli says tell me everything he said doesn't sound like a guy who's used to hearing from God he wants to know what's going on all right and and then it said every word of Samuels no I should none of the words of Samuels fell to the ground in other words they all came true which is a test of the prophet from Deuteronomy and thus he was confirmed as the prophet of Israel that's the end of chapter three so so what we see in Samuel is we see the exact kind of thing that God described I will raise up prophets and I will speak to them and I will confirm them and this is what happened with Samuel it is not a paradigm for Christians hearing from God not in the slightest and with regards to the question about listening prayer there was no prayer that was being prayed and there was no listening that was required because little Samuel heard God immediately he just mistakenly and understandably thought he was Eli and that's the distinction that you make that the mistake here is thinking that you have to learn certain techniques to hear certain things from God it's not that you're saying God never speaks to anyone ever correct but rather that when he does we hear it's not something we have to learn how to do or it'll and it's usually supernatural thing it's not like a like a hint or something like that it will be something recognizable that we know is God that's right when you look at the book of Acts virtually every single time God intervenes with special revelation it is supernatural it's a vision it's Jesus showing up it's an angel it's the Holy Spirit physically transporting Philip from one location to another location it's amazing and there's only two times that I know of

where it's not specified but one of those it does specify their prophets among their midst that's the first missionary journey so it presumes I mean a safest to presume that it was a prophet that spoke this word that's since all the Barnabas on that first missionary journey but yeah it's amazing to me that this way of looking at things have gotten so much traction I mean in one way I understand it because it feels personal and it's very subjective and we're given to that a lot nowadays but the the biblical justification is nil on the method that most people are talking about teaching and just to be clear Samuel's the first prophet with the kings but of course there's Moses before that yes that's right right right but he was the first great prophet to the nation yes that's right he's he started he started the kings because great because God had him anoint the kings yeah and it was from I mean Moses was absolutely unique and he was the type of Christ and but what Samuel was is he began the the kind of the the string of prophets that followed him that were God's spokespeople to the spokesperson to the people to enforce the covenants and yeah so there is a distinction in that regard but we don't want to dismisses don't forget Moses all right thank you Chris and Philip we appreciate hearing from you send us your question on on X with the hashtag strask or go to our website at str.org so you can send in your question this is Amy Hall and Greg Cocle for stand to reason