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Does Numbers 12:6-9 Indicate God Doesn't Always Speak Clearly?

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#STRask - Stand to Reason

Questions about whether Numbers 12:6-9 indicates that people don't always hear God clearly when he is speaking and how one should approach the staff of a Christian school that's promoting mindful meditation and teaching "how to hear from God" using mystical methods.

* Does Numbers 12:6-9 indicate that sometimes people don't hear God clearly when he is speaking?

* How would you approach the school staff at a Christian high school that's promoting mindful meditation and teaching "how to hear from God" using mystical methods?

Transcript

(upbeat music) (bell dings) - I'm Amy Hall, I'm here with Greg Coquel, and you're listening to Stan Tereason's #straskpodcast. - Hi Amy. - Hi Greg.

All right, today I have a couple questions for you, Greg, that are, it's something that you talk about a lot, it's one of the more distinctive things that we talk about here at Stan Tereason. - Yeah, I wish more people were talking about it actually, but maybe we'll try to lead the way on this one. - All right, so let's start with a question from Andrew Wickham.

- Okay. - I largely agree that we need to hear clearly from God, but I came across numbers 12, six through nine, and it seems to suggest some prophets were given riddles/dreams. How would you address this scripture? - All right, the largely agree part just to bring people up to speed is based on my continued, I don't wanna say assertion 'cause I'm not merely asserting it, but observation from the text that there was no discipline anyone had to pursue and develop that enabled them to hear from God, okay? And the reason is, is God doesn't try.

He does. Whenever God desired to communicate with anyone, he accomplished that desire and the theological thing that's at stake is when God applies his power to an exercise of his will, he always accomplishes what he wants to accomplish because he is God. So the notion that God is trying to speak to you, but you're not listening, if what one means is that we are not tuning into the voice of God, they could mean, well, obviously God's convicting you of sin and you're not paying attention to that, they could mean that, okay? That's something different.

I'm not contesting that. But if what they mean is, you know, you got the rock and roll up too loudly, you're too busy, and so God's trying to talk to you, but you can't listen. That means that your efforts are stronger than God's efforts.

Okay, and that's a libel on the character of God, in my view. And it's inconsistent with scripture because every time God wanted to speak, he's, he got his message across, even Saul who was unregenerate and murdering Christians by his own admission and by the record of the book of Acts, God still clearly got through to him, Saul didn't have any trouble hearing the voice of God. There's no need to develop such a thing.

Okay, now the counter argument and Andrew in this case saying, yeah, I largely agree that God's gonna speak clearly. And by the way, to underscore the point, if you go to 1 Corinthians chapter 14, there's an argument Paul is employing regarding tongues without interpretation that applies here. So he gives a general principle that applies it to tongues and interpretation, but the general principle applies here too, Amy.

And that is, unless we speak with the mouth, words that are clear, how would it be understood what we're saying and we'd be speaking into the wind kind of thing. And the same thing here, that's the lesson of the bugle 'cause he uses an example of a bugle sound and military commands, comms basically back then were accomplished through bugle sounds of a certain type. But if you can't tell what the sound is, you don't know what to do.

Great observation, biblical point, Paul's applying it to speaking in tongues without interpretation. It also applies to the nebulous voice of God that we're trying to hear, but God's not getting through because there's something we're doing wrong. No, God can get through.

And basically what we're saying, if we follow that line of thinking is that God consistently speaks with an unclear voice. And so he violates this principle of the vehicle that I see in 1 Corinthians 14. And so now we have this counter example, possibly from Numbers chapter 12.

And here's what Numbers says here. And this is the context here is where Aaron and Miriam are murmuring against God and against Moses because Moses is all high and mighty, you know, hearing from God and they've got a place in the project too. Moses

isn't that hot or that special.

So God responds to that. He was not happy. And here's what the text says, starting in verse five.

Then the Lord came down in the pillar of a cloud and stood in the doorway of the tent and he called Aaron and Miriam. When they both came forward, he said, okay, now this is interesting 'cause now there's a supernatural manifestation and God's going to talk to Miriam and Aaron and set them straight. And he says, now hear my words.

If there is a prophet among you, I the Lord shall make myself known to him in a vision. I shall speak with him in a dream, not so with Moses my servant. He is faithful in all my household.

With him I speak mouth to mouth even openly and not in dark sayings. And he beholds the form of the Lord. Why then were you not afraid to speak against my servant? So there's a chastisement there.

It's interesting what God says is that I have one group of people that I'm going to speak through in a somewhat indirect way. Notice not unclear, just indirect. But Moses, I talk face to face, ear to ear as it were, okay? And by the way, that's the way God is talking to Aaron and Miriam in that moment.

Okay, so what we have here is a clear communication from God and acknowledging his ability to communicate clearly in different circumstances with different phenomenology, if you will. But Moses is so special, he's not gonna use a vision. He's not gonna use a dream.

He's going to go have a direct conversation. Now in the New Testament, we actually have a number of dreams and visions. Even the Apostle Paul is appeared to by Jesus.

And when you read the accounts, there's a couple of times this happens. It's not entirely clear what's happening. First, Jesus appears to him at the bed and tells him, for example, don't fear any longer.

I have many people in the city in Corinth. So Paul is kind of afraid, understandably, and Jesus appeared. But then other time there's referred to as a vision.

The point I'm making is in either case, whether it's a vision or direct or if it was a vision that it seemed direct to him, it is a direct clear communication. There was no confusion about that. Sometimes there are dreams that you have to, in a sense, decipher.

Well, that happened with Joseph, but Joseph knew how to decipher Pharaoh's dreams. In any event, I don't see anything in this text. If there's a prophet among you, by the Lord, she'll make myself known to him in a vision.

I shall speak with him in a dream. I don't see how there's anything about that comment that in least-wise undermines my claim that when God wants to communicate something, we don't have to kind of learn how to decipher the signs or the little nudges or what's God saying. And I think he's trying to tell me or whatever.

Now, again, I want to clarify that in the process of sanctification, I think there is a sense in which we can talk like that, but we really mean something different. We're looking at the way God is working in our lives and the conviction on our heart and the wisdom and the insight the Holy Spirit is giving us. And we could say something like I might say, well, here's what God's teaching me now is to be gentler and kinder with my teenage daughters.

Well, that's not because God told me something. It's because the Holy Spirit, I think is moving in my life in that way. So I would use that kind of language to describe that.

This is not what we're talking about here. When God wants to make a direct communication, he can do this like he did with Moses, boom, boom, boom. There you go.

Mouth to ear, so to speak. Or he could do it through a vision or he could do it through a dream. We have manifestations of that in the gospels, especially in the birth narratives, dreams, and also visions in the book of Acts.

And a couple of cases where it's not entirely clear how the Holy Spirit spoke or communicated, but it was clear that he communicated clearly. Okay. When the apostles are sent off in their first missionary journey, it just says, "The Holy Spirit said, set aside solid part of us for the work that I have for them." Okay, it was unusual.

'Cause of the second missionary journey, that wasn't how it happened. They made the decision to revisit the churches they had established. It was a prudent decision based on their responsibilities as apostles and evangelists.

And, but it does say in that first case when they were commissioned by the Spirit that they were there waiting on the Lord in the presence of prophets. Why would it say that? Because right after it says, in the presence of prophets, it said, and the Holy Spirit said, so the most common expression or understanding is that there was a prophetic word given. It wasn't a nudge, nudge hint yet.

I'm trying to discern the voice of God in that circumstance. Okay. So I honestly don't, I don't see how this passage in any way undermines the larger point that I've been making for many years now as you pointed out.

Because I think this has, there's a lot of gravity to this issue. It has huge ramifications for Christian living and people make all kinds of foolish decisions based on things they think God told them when there's no reason to think that that's actually the case. Or they don't hear anything and they feel substandard as Christians.

And boy, have I heard this a lot. So people are relieved when I say, "This isn't the way it works." And what's interesting by the way is, Jesus, rather God is not saying here to Miriam and Aaron that this is the only way he's gonna speak through everybody else except for Moses. He's just making a comparison, that's all.

And as it turns out, you got a first Kings 19 and there's Elijah and he's all depressed and he's bummed out and he just had this great, great victory with the prophets of Beholder and Mount Carmel and then fire came down and consumed this sacrifice and then Jezebel got mad at him and he picked up his scarcity. He ran south to the negative to finally to Sinai and he's mourning before God. And God comes out and talks to him.

And that's the so-called still small voice passage but my translation doesn't even use that language. God is not kind of giving him a little nudge. He's walking out and having a conversation and he gives them very specific directions and it appears from the text that this is a conversation, it's not a vision and it's not a dream.

So God can still work in all these different ways and I have no problem with that. And I'm convinced that even today God does work in dreams and visions and direct communications. I have no reason to believe biblically that this is something every Christian should expect to experience in virtue of their spirituality if they apply themselves diligently enough to learn the skill because there is no such thing in the New Testament.

So this probably is a good segue into the next question. - Well, I have a couple of things to say about this first. - Oh yeah, I'm sorry, Amy of course.

- Yeah, I think the key thing here is he says, "I shall make myself known." So I agree, I don't think this passage is actually saying that we have to learn how to listen to God and look for his signs and look for different things that we can then interpret. I agree, God makes himself known. And I was just thinking about when Peter gets his vision about the sheep coming down and he sees all the unclean things there.

And in that case, even in that case, obviously Peter didn't know what it meant at first, but it was clear what he had seen. It wasn't that he was just, "Oh, I think I feel like maybe God wants me to blah, blah, blah." You know, it was, "I saw this and I don't exactly know what this means." - Well, there wasn't interpretation because the spirit said, "What God has declared clean, don't let any man declare unclean." Now there's, that's mysterious until what happens next. - Right, so he didn't know how to apply it yet, but the message itself was completely clear and objective.

And it wasn't that he was just trying to discern things he was seeing around him and trying to figure out what God might be telling him. - He's cipher the, the, the answer, the nudges, right? - Because I think sometimes people misunderstand what you're saying here. So hopefully we've clarified the right distinctions here.

We're not saying God doesn't interact with people. The Holy Spirit does apply things to our lives. He does convict us of our sin.

He does comfort us. He does all these things. We're just saying it's not that we have to learn some skill of trying to hear what God is saying.

And by the way, when I, this has happened so many times, back in the days when I was on KBRT and commercial radio, he talking about this and getting calls in from the street as it were. And even now people say, "Well, if God isn't talking "in my ear by the Spirit, what is the point of the Spirit?" And what this tells me is that they're, they're new mythology. They're doctrine of the Spirit.

What they're understanding of what the Bible teaches about the role of the Spirit in their life is completely vacuous. They have no doctrine of the Holy Spirit. The only doctrine they have is the Holy Spirit speaking in their ear.

And I'm saying, well, that's not what the Bible teaches. And they say, what's the point? So they don't know about the counselor of the Holy Spirit, the comforter of the Holy Spirit, the convicting of sin, et cetera, et cetera. No, when you mention those things, I say, oh yeah, well, I know about that.

Well, that's what the Holy Spirit does. But they think that the most important role of the Holy Spirit is to give them private messages about their lives and instead of the Holy Spirit illuminating the text so that they understand the Scripture as it applies to their life. And that's a very different motif.

- Right, in that second motif, you learn wisdom from the Scripture and you learn immature and you become someone who makes better decisions and who knows how to apply what God has already said to our lives. Okay, Greg, so that brings us to the next question. This one comes from Bailey.

How would you approach the school staff at a Christian high school where our son attends who recently hosted a spiritual emphasis week that promoted mindful meditation and how to hear from God using mystical methods? And then he has in parentheses, Biola staff. These are unbiblical in my view. What questions would you ask?

- Mindful meditation, I'm just writing it down so I get it right, the other phrase.

- And quote, "How to hear from God." - How to hear. - Using mystical methods. - Okay, so this actually has been going on quite a while up by Ola and it's always troubled me.

In fact, it was right about the time I was about to graduate which was 2006 when I graduated with my masters in philosophy from Biola where they had worked in this curriculum of spiritual formation into the curriculum and spiritual formation. Well, that's great, depending on what you mean by that. And this kind of thing, this mystical aspect, this mystical subject of aspect was worked in there.

Now, I wanna be careful 'cause I don't wanna be misunderstood. I'm not against subjective stuff that are biblically appropriate, okay? But notice how he word this mindful meditation. Well, that could be in one thing, it could be in another, it depends.

I'm just gonna read it charitably and say that we are meditating in a thoughtful way on something in scripture. All right, as opposed to kind of emptying our mind. Now, some of the things that I've heard coming out of that program, and I'm just using Biola as an example because this is the example here, but has broader application.

And apparently, this must be a high school that's associated with Biola that is which class is being taught by Biola staff, okay? There you go, so just to clarify. So what David describes is meditating on God's word and that's substantive and contentful where we take something that God has taught and we think about it, it's like chewing the cud, you know, we're just chewing on it. That's great, all right? But sometimes the methods are, well, we're just kind of maybe focusing on a word and repeating the word in our mind and seeing where God takes us with the word, you know, and so this is, what do they call it? Lexus, the divine word.

- Oh my gosh, it's... - Lexus, David, Tatus or something like that. And of course, that's not word this. - I can't believe I can't think of it.

- Yeah, okay, see what I have is catching and you're getting it. - Lectio, Divina. - There you go, Lectio.

- Divina. - Yeah, Lexus is. - I'm sorry, I'm so embarrassed.

- I don't know. - It's like, for this lady times. - But I think there are different ways to do that and one way is like really good, meditating on the word but then there's another way that people employ this concept that turns out to be, you know, more mystical, inappropriately mystical.

And maybe that's part of what's going on here. I've just heard different accounts from this source, from the Biola crowd. And some people are really against it and other people are, you know, just totally into it, okay? But the question is biblical teaching.

It's not the intention. It's not the spirituality of the sound of the enterprise. It is what is being done and what the scripture instructs, okay? And the scripture instructs us on meditation and reflection and interaction with people in a substantive and a contentful way.

There is no instruction on hearing the voice of God. There's none, there's not a single word. I had a discipleship group years ago where we assigned different parts of the New Testament and they were to read every word of that and isolate any kind of reference to prayer.

So you've got a lot of stuff on prayer. The word prayer is in use. So you can't just use a concordance.

There are prayers in the New Testament. There are times, and I bow my knee before the Father and I say, "Bababababababab," so you've got to, you know, read it all. And we did that.

And in fact, the outline I think is on the website, prayer in the New Testament or New Testament on prayer, STR.org. The whole outline is there and there is not a single hint or reference of any kind to listening prayer. Though you can read books by really fine people who have chapters on listening prayer and the rationalist, we talk to God, then God talks to us. Well, that may be their rational conversation, but that's not a biblical rationale.

It's not a biblical practice. And so in fact, my own daughter, who's a sophomore in a very good Christian school, had an assignment like this given to her about praying about things in your life and then coming back a report if they thought they heard anything from God. Okay, well, I called the headmaster.

I actually didn't call him, I met with him. I went to the school. There were actually two concerns.

One was a biblical issue about the book of Hebrews, but this was another one, the second thing. And I went with my hat in my hand and I told him, "Because it's not my job "to tell you how to do your job, "but this is a concern and here are the reasons why "and this is my field." And I've seen a lot of problems with this. I want you to know that this is what took place in this class and here are the reasons that I'm troubled by the biblical reasons.

Then I just left it with him. There was a little follow up and I was glad to hear that. And I don't know if it ultimately make a difference for the teacher involved because it's very hard to disabuse people of this practice since it is so subjectively personal to them.

I promise you, and I don't know in this case, but in some many cases when I've actually talked with people, addressed this, nothing changed in their view, nothing, regardless of what scripture or the literal case I made, regardless of how the verses were being used out of context. And we have a booklet at standard reason called the Ambassador's Guide to the Voice of God, is that right? - I think it's hearing the voice of God, the Ambassador's Guide to hearing the voice of God. - No.

- No, it's to the voice of God, right? - The voice of God, okay. - Okay, so that's available. And all I'm doing in that case is I'm just exegeting passages that people use as proof texts to demonstrate that when you read these in context, they don't mean anything like what people are employing them to mean, okay? And so in this case, I went to the

leadership and I told him, look, I'm not trying to get anybody in trouble, I don't have an axe to grind.

I'm not an angry parent, but I am a concerned parent and I'm biblically informed on this issue and here are my reasons. And then I said, okay, I'm done. I trust you to take it where you think it's best to go and it's not my job to run your school, that's your job.

- Done. And so I had my hand and that worked out all right, but I think the point of application here is when there's something especially involving my child in their school, I felt it necessary to step up and give a rationale. And I'm especially troubled by hearing the voice of God using mystical methods and see, that's something that needs more clarification.

What is a mystical method? What is Andrew? Is it Andrew? No, it's... - Bailey. - Bailey, what does Bailey mean by that? Or maybe Bailey's just repeating what he read in the description, what do they mean by that? What mystical methods? What mystical things are biblically appropriate for Christians? I'm not disqualifying all mystical things, but they have to be biblically sound. That's all I'm saying.

Notice what's happening though, and this is all what people don't... They don't think carefully about it, Amy. When you hear from God, if it's God, or if you think it's God, then the words that you hear have exactly the same authority as any verse in the Bible. God's word is God's word.

Now it doesn't have the same application. The Bible is for everybody. The word you think you got from God is just for you.

Okay, I get that distinction, all right? And maybe it's not theology. It's just what God wants you to do at some circumstance or whatever. Nevertheless, on this way of looking at it, hearing from God means you're hearing from God, and God's word is inviolable.

God never gets it wrong. And if he tells you you've got to do something, you have to do it. Now you can start to see the application problems.

If people start feeling convinced that God is somehow telling them they've got to do this, that you can't talk with them about it. As long as it's not like killing somebody or stealing something or something clearly a violation of God's moral will, they think they're justified in doing it. They've already checked it out, does violate Scripture.

My point is the method violates Scripture. Let me say that again, 'cause it's really important. The method violates Scripture.

And so people are going to presume God is telling them something that they then must follow through because after all it is God. And even though what they're doing is not sinful, it may be stupid, maybe foolish, or it may just not be God. Yet they're giving it

divine authority.

Okay? Now once again, these are application problems that I see on something that is not biblical. So I'm not just saying, oh, there's a slippery slope. One thing leads to another and look what can happen.

That's not what I'm saying here. What I'm saying is the practice isn't biblical, period. The way it's being taught is not what the Bible teaches.

We are not exhorted to get mystical and learn how to hear the voice of God. This is not in the Scripture. Does God speak in the book of Acts? Sure, he intervenes in the circumstances, almost never being sought, and it's crystal clear and almost always supernatural.

A vision, a dream, holy suit speaks probably through prophets in that one case. It happens 14 times in the book of Acts from the time of Pentecost on. I have it all recorded there, and you can find it on our website, the voice of God of the book of Acts.

I think it's the title there, really creative titles. But you see, they have a very distinctive pattern and they're rare. That's 14 times in 30 years.

That we have a record of it. Okay, so this wasn't common fare even for the disciples. And so then having shown that it's not biblical, then I look at the problems in application that people run into.

I'm not just saying, well, this could get out of hand. So we gotta be careful. I'm saying this isn't sound biblically and it gets out of hand.

You see the distinction there? My complaint isn't that it might get out of hand. My complaint is it's not sound. And anything that's taught that is not biblically sound is going to have negative ramifications.

- So I think a good question Bailey could ask would be simply, can you make a biblical case for using this method? Or what is your biblical case for using this method? And then you can present your biblical case for not using this method. And in addition to the book that you mentioned, Greg, on our website at str.org, we also have a three part series called Does God Whisper? - Yeah, that's right. - Where you go through all these things.

Because if you're hearing this for the first time, you might be really upset right now. So I just encourage you to look at the case that Greg makes in those articles and look at the biblical case. And so that's something you can ask the leadership there.

- And clarity on asking a question like what do you mean by that? Our basic Colombo question about what do you mean? What are the mystical methods? And when you say hearing the voice of God, hear from God, have the instructors give clarification on what

that means? Now I don't think there's going to be any ambiguity. I think we're understanding correctly what they have in mind. But when he says using mystical methods, that needs some clarification too.

And so it might be good to first start out with those questions. And then once you get real good clarity on what's going on, press on this other issue. And if Bailey, you have either the booklet or the article and they overlap in content, the articles that Amy talked about, does God whisper, they overlap in content.

Then you will have a biblical basis for raising the question. For example, people might say, "Oh, well, the scripture says, 'My sheep hear my voice.'" And that's the end of it for them. They don't know where it is.

It's in Matthew 10. They don't know what's going on. The sheep there are people who are not even saved, as it turns out, who gets saved because they quote, unquote hear his voice.

But they still apply it to hearing the voice of God in the way that they're teaching it and they think they have biblical justification. So it's important to know what the background context of the proof texts they're going to fire at you, Bailey. When you raise questions about this.

Okay? And that's what the booklet and the articles will help too. - And I just want to say, I've had somebody come to me with deep regrets about making a major life decision this way. By thinking God was telling her to do something and then feeling like she's paying for that the rest of her life, I've had somebody come to me who was so kind of paralyzed, not able to make a decision about something.

And when I explained this to her, she hugged me. She was so relieved that she could move forward in wisdom and not have to be stuck until she hears some special message from God. So I do think people do respond well to this when they're open to seeing what the Bible says about it.

And I think there's a lot of freedom and relief. But I think people latch onto this because they're afraid of making bad decisions. And so they think if they can just do exactly what God wants them to do, everything will go right in their life.

- What they think God is telling you to do. - Yes. But here's the thing.

We've talked about this many times. It's not God's intention for you to have a pain-free life. So if you're worried about making a decision that might be quote bad and lead to pain and trouble, well, I can guarantee you right now, you're gonna have pain and trouble.

- That's right. - And so we can rest in the fact that God is working all things together for

good. So we make a decision in wisdom, doing our best to honor God and give him glory and do the right thing.

And we can trust that God is working through every instance in our life. And if something goes wrong, it doesn't mean that we made the wrong decision. It just means that now you have this suffering in your life that has been appointed to you and God, it has a purpose for it.

So I think you have to go into it with that mindset in order to be able to have the freedom to make decisions. - There's kind of an idealism that's associated, I think with this whole process as part of the appeal is very subjective. God's talking to me, he's got my plan for my life that I can figure out and that's all just for me.

That's part of it, that's part of the appeal. The other part, excuse me, I think is what you're saying. We don't want to make any mistakes.

So if you just get it directly from God, then we know we're doing just exactly the right thing, whatever prevails. But as Amy's pointing out, the way through life for every single godly person in scripture with the exception of Jesus is Herky Jerky, stop and start, re-you know, up and then down, back and forth and God using all the hardships. No, Jesus had his path and he stayed on it and he got it all right, but that's not us.

And of course, even with getting it all right, he had lots of sufferings well acquainted with grief. Peter says, "Just as Jesus suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves for the same purpose." Okay, that's first Peter too. So this is very important.

And I think sometimes the desire here is I'm going to avoid trouble if I can just hear properly. And if I didn't hear right, the first time, now I'm going to undo that mistake. I married the wrong person.

This other person was the right person, okay? And we're here that one before, yeah. People get married on this system, you know? Mary and Hays repent and leisure is the saying, well, the same thing applies here. Variations marry based on God's nudges and repent and leisure, you know? That isn't the way the Bible teaches us to make that kind of decision or any other kinds of decisions for that matter.

- Well, thank you, Greg. Thank you, Andrew and Bailey. You obviously picked a topic that we have a lot to say about.

So hopefully this was helpful to you and you'll look into those resources that we mentioned on str.org. All right, this is Amy Holland, Greg Cockel. Thanks for listening. (bell dings)

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