

Shama — Hearing That Acts

Richard Wurmbrand was a pastor in Romania when the communists took over. He was imprisoned, tortured on multiple occasions, and placed in solitary confinement in total darkness for three years straight. In that darkness, with nothing but his own thoughts, he asked himself a question.

"Do I believe in God?"

This was a man imprisoned for his faith in Jesus Christ — and he was asking himself this question. He wrote about it later. He said there are two kinds of Christians: those who believe in God, and those who — just as sincerely — believe that they believe in God. Not false Christians versus real ones. Not hypocrites versus the devout. Two kinds of sincere people. Both think they believe. Both would say they believe. But only one of them has a faith that has actually landed somewhere — that has moved from the mind into the heart, from information into encounter, from knowing about God to knowing God.

Wurmbrand came out of those three years intact. Through prayer and the Scripture he had memorized before the darkness, he held. He later helped found Voice of the Martyrs, a ministry devoted to serving persecuted Christians around the world. The faith that sustained him through three years of total darkness was not a faith that had merely heard about God. It was a faith that had responded to Him — that had built up years of active encounter with the living Word before the worst came.

Think about that. And ask yourself the same question — do you believe in God, or do you — just as sincerely — believe that you believe in God?

I am not trying to make anyone doubt their salvation. But I am hoping the question opens up some others. What is your purpose? And more importantly — what are you doing about it? Because if you know what God has called you to but you are not moving toward it, your hearing may be more passive than you think.

When you read the Bible, do you actually hear God speaking? Or are you collecting information?

That is what this chapter is about.

There is a kind of hearing that changes nothing. And there is a kind of hearing that changes everything. The difference is not in the content of what is heard. It is in whether the one hearing responds.

And it connects directly to seeing. Because you cannot walk with spiritual eyes open if you are not first willing to hear. The same person who hears God and does nothing will also look at spiritual reality and perceive nothing. Hearing and seeing, in Scripture, are always the same posture — a life turned toward God, ready to receive and ready to respond.



WHAT SHAMA ACTUALLY MEANS

The Hebrew word translated “hear” throughout the Old Testament carries more weight than modern readers often assume. In English, hearing can sound passive. Sound reaches the ear. Information is received. That is all the word seems to require.

But Scripture treats hearing differently.

To hear God in the biblical sense is not simply to receive sound. It is to receive, yield, and respond. The word is never treated as complete when the words are understood. It is complete when the person has responded rightly to what God said. Hearing, in God’s economy, always implies movement. It always implies obedience. It always implies that something changes in the one who truly hears.

This is why the most important commands in Scripture begin with the word hear. God is not asking for your attention. He is calling the whole person — mind, heart, will, and life — to come under what He has spoken.

The New Testament carries the same weight. When Paul says that faith comes by hearing, he is not describing a passive process where truth brushes against the mind and automatically produces life. And when Jesus says “he who has ears to hear, let him hear,” He is not talking about physical hearing. He is talking about spiritual receptivity — the willingness to receive what God is saying in a way that answers Him.

Having ears and hearing are two different things.

Most people in the crowds around Jesus had ears. Not all of them were hearing. The distinction is not physical. It is spiritual. It is the difference between information that passes through the mind and truth that is received deeply enough to move the heart, bend the will, and change the life.

It is also the difference between eyes that are open and eyes that are closed.

“He who has ears to hear, let him hear.” — Matthew 11:15 NKJV



FAITH COMES BY HEARING

Paul writes in Romans that faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God. This verse is often read as a simple chain: the Word is preached, someone hears it, faith is produced.

But Paul is doing something more precise than that. He is linking two things that are both active. Faith is not passive acceptance — it is trust that acts, that moves, that produces something. And hearing, in the biblical sense, is not passive reception — it is the kind of engagement with God’s Word that results in response. Paul is not saying that hearing automatically produces faith. He is saying that the kind of hearing that is truly hearing — hearing that responds — is where faith comes from.

James says the same thing from a different angle. Faith without works is dead. This is not a separate idea bolted onto the faith conversation. It is the same truth. Because faith without the kind of hearing that produces action is faith that has not actually landed. It is information stored in the mind that has not reached the heart. It is sincere belief that something is true without the life change that genuine encounter with truth always produces.

“Faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.” — Romans 10:17 ESV

Every time you read Scripture and walk away unchanged, you are practicing a kind of hearing that the Bible never calls hearing at all. Every time God speaks to you — through His Word, through genuine preaching, through the Spirit — and you walk away unchanged, you are feeding a passive relationship with the living Word.

And passive relationships with the living Word do not stay neutral. They drift. They cool. They harden.

And when the hearing dulls, so does the seeing.

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THE HARDENING NOBODY TALKS ABOUT

Isaiah warned about this. Jesus quoted him. It is one of the most sobering passages in the entire Bible.

“You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving. For this people’s heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes.” — Matthew 13:14–15 NIV

Notice that Jesus links hearing and seeing together. Ever hearing but never understanding. Ever seeing but never perceiving. Both fail at the same time. Because they are the same posture. The person who will not respond to what they hear will also fail to perceive what they see. The eyes and the ears are connected at the heart.

This is not a description of people who never encountered the Word. It is a description of people who encountered it repeatedly and never responded. The result of that pattern — over time, accumulated, consistent — is a heart that becomes calloused. A spiritual capacity that erodes.

The brain physically rewires based on what you consistently do. Respond to God's Word consistently and the capacity to hear grows. Hear without responding consistently and the capacity diminishes. Not all at once. Gradually. Quietly. Until one day a person who once was tender to God's voice finds that something has closed.

I have seen this. You have probably seen it too. Someone who was once genuinely hungry for God — who used to respond, who used to be moved, who used to act on what they heard — who over time became dull. Who now sits in the same services, hears the same truths, and nothing moves. The content has not changed. The person has. Not through dramatic rebellion. Through the slow accumulation of hearing without responding.

This is one of the most serious warnings in Scripture. And it is almost never talked about.

If you recognize yourself in that description, I want to be clear: this is not a verdict. It is a warning. And warnings only come to people who still have time to respond. The same God who spoke to you before is still speaking. Jesus Christ is the same, yesterday, today and forever! The capacity that has grown dull can be renewed. The ears that have grown heavy can be opened again. That is the whole point of Romans 12:2 — be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Transformation is always available. The door is not closed. It just requires the same thing it always has: a response.



ABRAHAM AND THE OBEDIENCE OF HEARING

The clearest picture of this kind of hearing in the entire Bible might be Abraham.

Seventy-five years old. A whole life behind him. Everything he had ever built. And then God spoke.

“Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you.”
— Genesis 12:1 NIV

God did not tell him where he was going. He told him to go, and that He would show him. That is not a plan. That is a direction and a promise.

And Abraham went.

I imagine there were people in his life who thought he had lost his mind. The normal path was right there — stay, build, settle, live out your years the way everyone around you lives out theirs. But Abraham heard God, and real hearing meant he could not stay still.

He is called the father of faith. Not because he had perfect theology. Not because he never doubted. But because when God spoke, Abraham moved. That movement — that response to what was heard — is the definition of the kind of hearing God has always been looking for.

And through that hearing, through that one act of obedient response to a voice that told him to leave everything, the entire plan of redemption for humanity began to unfold.

That is what active hearing produces. Not just personal blessing. Not just individual growth. God works through people who hear and respond in ways that affect generations.



DO YOU BELIEVE IN GOD OR DO YOU BELIEVE THAT YOU BELIEVE?

Go back to Wurmbrand's question. It is worth sitting with longer than feels comfortable. Do you believe in God? Or do you sincerely believe that you believe in God?

The honest answer for many people — and I say this having had to ask it of myself — is that we have accumulated a great deal of information about God without it producing the kind of encounter that changes us. We know the stories. We know the verses. We can explain the theology. But the knowing has stayed in the mind. It has not pressed down into the heart in a way that alters how we actually live on an ordinary day.

That is passive hearing. And passive hearing — no matter how sincere, no matter how long it has been practiced — does not produce the life that God designed.

And it does not produce the kind of seeing this book is about either. You cannot walk with spiritual eyes open while living in passive hearing. The two go together. Eyes open, ears responding. Or eyes closed, ears dull. There is no middle ground.

Jesus said that many will call Him Lord and He will say He never knew them. Not a few. Many. The most troubling word in that verse is not “depart.” It is “never.” Never knew you. Which means there was never a genuine two-way relationship. There was religious activity, even miraculous activity, but not the kind of knowing that comes from a person who truly hears — who responds, who obeys, who allows what God says to shape who they actually are.

“Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and in your name perform many miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'” — Matthew 7:22–23 NIV

The antidote to this is not more information. It is not more church attendance or not how much theology you know. It is hearing that acts. Encountering the Word of God and asking every time, not just “what does this mean?” but “what does this require of me?”



WHAT HEARING LOOKS LIKE IN AN ORDINARY DAY

Active hearing is not only about what happens during Bible reading. It is a posture that carries through an entire day.

It means praying with expectation that God will actually speak — not a monologue, but a conversation. It means paying attention to the promptings that come in ordinary moments — the nudge to reach out to someone, the check in your spirit before a decision, the conviction that something needs to change. These are not coincidences. They are God speaking. And real hearing means you respond.

It means when Scripture convicts you of something, you do not store the conviction as interesting information and move on. You act on it. You make the call. You have the conversation. You change the habit. You take the step. Not perfectly. Not all at once. But in the direction of the Word.

It means that when you sense God calling you somewhere uncomfortable — as He called Abraham, as He calls everyone who follows Him seriously — you do not wait until everything is clear. You take the next step in the direction He is pointing. Because faith that comes by hearing is faith that moves.

I wrote a note to myself once during a season when I was genuinely awake to God. The note was titled “Josh, You are awake!” One line from it has stayed with me: “Speak to God and listen for God to speak back to you.” That is hearing in its simplest form. A two-way relationship. Not just words sent upward but ears turned toward Him, waiting, ready to hear — and ready to move when He speaks.

And when that posture is real — when the hearing is active and the response is genuine — the eyes begin to open. What was invisible becomes visible. What was confusing becomes clear. What once seemed distant becomes close.

Hearing and seeing are the same thing. Both require a heart that is turned toward God and willing to respond to what He reveals.

“So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.” — Romans 10:17 NKJV

Faith that comes by hearing is faith that was produced by the kind of hearing that responds. It is the faith that sustained Wurmbrand in the dark. It is the faith that moved Abraham into the unknown. It is the faith that grows stronger every time you choose to respond rather than store.

And it dies a little every time you choose not to.

The Word is speaking. The question has never been whether God is saying something. The question is whether you are the kind of person who, when He speaks, moves.