

**Is it OK to Ask God to Share His Thoughts with Us
about How He Has Gifted and Designed Others So We Can Encourage Them?**

David says in Psalm 139:17-18a, "How precious to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them! If I would count them, they are more than the sand" (ESV and so throughout unless indicated otherwise). As one reads the Scriptures, we see numerous examples where God takes the initiative to communicate with his people. God can make known to us what we did not know or could not have known through our five senses alone. These thoughts, pictures, and words from God are both encouraging and comforting and almost always formative for God's purposes for an individual.

We see examples of God communicating like this in 1 Sam 3 when the Lord began to speak to the boy Samuel when he was ministering to the Lord. Then again in 1 Sam 9 the Lord revealed to the older Samuel that he would send him a man from the land of Benjamin that he should anoint as king over Israel. When Samuel met Saul who was out looking for his father's donkeys, he said: "'I am the seer. Go up before me to the high place, for today you shall eat with me, and in the morning I will let you go and will tell you all that is on your mind. ²⁰As for your donkeys that were lost three days ago, do not set your mind on them, for they have been found'" (1 Sam 9:19-20a). Luke tells us about a "righteous and devout" man named Simeon who was waiting for Israel's Messiah, "and the Holy Spirit was upon him. ²⁶And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ" (Luke 2:25b-26). We read also in Gal 2:1-2 that it was "because of a revelation" that Paul went to Jerusalem "after fourteen years" to present his case to the authorities with whom he was often in tension. We could cite many more examples.

But what about *asking* God to speak *to us* so that we can encourage and build up *others*? Is it "unbiblical" to ask for God's perspective, to pursue prophetic words, and to ask God to use us to encourage others with thoughts that come from him and speak personally to others? The only gift of the Spirit that occurs in all four gift lists is the gift of prophecy, and this gift involves God revealing his thoughts to others. So whatever we might want to call what Paul calls "revelation," these thoughts are given in part so that believers can convey them to others "for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation" (1 Cor 14:3, cf. 1 Cor 14:24-25, 26, 29-33; 1 Thess 5:19-21; Acts 15:32; John 1:47-51; 4:16-19).

Some may think that it is more God-honoring to take a passive role in this connection and let God be God without actively pursuing him. Perhaps the believer who lives within this second framework assumes that the more supernatural gifts of the Spirit are (or should be) delivered *perfectly* to the recipients, and since God is perfect, so should his communications be. Yet NT scholars agree that Paul makes no distinction between what we call "miraculous spiritual gifts" (prophecies, healings, working of miracles, tongues, interpretation of tongues) and the others in his lists that we think of as more "natural" (teaching, helping, administering). And Paul's exhortation to weigh carefully what is said prophetically (1 Cor 14:29), to test prophecies (1 Thess 5:19), along with the deliberations he and his travelling companions had over his prophetic directional dream in the context of Acts 16:6-10, implies that such revelations are *not* in and of themselves perfect (cf. 1 Cor 13:9-12). Interpretation and evaluation is involved. The notion that it is somehow unbiblical to ask God to speak to and through us overlooks the active role that I believe God desires us to play in ministering with and for him as his fellow-workers (cf. 1 Cor 3:5-15).

First, I doubt that any serious Jesus-follower would intentionally take a passive “Let go and let God” orientation to his or her own spiritual progress. There are too many passages that exhort us to take an active role in pursuing holiness (2 Cor 7:1) and making sure that we make progress in Christ-likeness (Eph 4:20-24; 1 Peter 2:1-3), in putting on the divine nature (2 Peter 1:3-11), etc. Paul even says to the Philippians after he said that one mark of spiritual maturity is to go on with Christ: “Let those of us who are mature think this way, and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you” (Phil 3:15). So we really should not posture ourselves to take a passive role when it comes to seeking personal guidance for ourselves or encouraging words for others.

The Scriptures reveal a different perspective. Consider the following sampling of passages which encourage God’s children to ask him for gifts, for answers to prayer, for healing from sickness, and deliverance from trials (but the decision is still left up to him), and that he desires us to ask him for big things; and not only that, but he *delights* in our doing so:

- **Psalm 34:6-8:** “This poor man cried, and the LORD heard him and saved him out of all his troubles. ⁷The angel of the LORD encamps around those who fear him, and delivers them. ⁸Oh, taste and see that the LORD is good! Blessed is the man who takes refuge in him!”
- **Isaiah 7:11:** ““Ask a sign of the LORD your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven.””
- **Jer 33:3:** ““Call to me and I will answer you, and will tell you great and hidden things that you have not known.””
- **Isaiah 59:1-2:** ““Behold, the LORD’s hand is not shortened, that it cannot save, or his ear dull, that it cannot hear; ²but your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden his face from you so that he does not hear.””

For example, the invitation that David makes in Psalm 34:8 which encourages us to “put God to the test in any similar situation” (Leupold, *Commentary on the Psalms*, 280) is virtually identical to Jesus’ command-invitation in **Matt 7:7-8** to keep on asking, keep on seeking, and keep on knocking (cf. Psalm 34:14b, “seek” and “pursue.”). Jesus encourages us even further by comparing God to an earthly father. He really wants us to know that *God is so much more generous*, so much more willing to respond to the requests of his children *than any earthly father would be* (Matt 7:9-10/Luke 11:11-12). Jesus caps off this invitation to explore the Lord’s generosity by saying: “If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven **give good things** [Luke’s parallel has: “**the Holy Spirit**”] to those who ask him!” (Matt 7:11/Luke 11:13). It is so encouraging that the Psalmist in the second half of Psalm 34:9 and 10 says the same thing that Jesus does in Matt 7:11: “those who fear him have no lack” (34:9b) and “those who seek the Lord lack no good thing” (34:10b).

To camp on Jesus’ words in Matt 7 just a little, I love how R. T. France brings out the implications of what Jesus is saying in Matt 7:7-8. Again, this is so similar to what David says about God in Psalm 34:8. France notes that even though we know that not everything we would like to have is granted to us, “there is an openness about vv. 7-8 which invites not merely a resigned acceptance of what the Father gives, but **a willingness to explore the extent of his generosity** [my bold] secure in the knowledge that only what is ‘good’ will be given, so that mistakes in prayer through human short-sightedness will not rebound on those praying” (*Matthew* [NICNT, 2007], 279, cited in Moreland and Issler, *In Search of Confident Faith*, 114).

I have also heard faithful followers of Jesus argue that to seek revelations from God in ministry settings is not appropriate and that Christians should wait for God to speak to us. I think this reflects a wrong orientation toward our Heavenly Father, much like the orientation of the prodigal son's older brother (cf. Luke 15:29-31; cf. John 15:15; 16:12-15). James himself says in 1:5-8: "If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways."

Receiving various types of blessings or gifts from the Lord is not a passive thing. Here's how the *Life Application Bible's* note on Psalm 34:1ff. highlights this: "God promises great blessings to his people, but many of these blessings are conditional. He will free us from fear (34:4), deliver us from trouble (34:6), guard us (34:7), show us kindness (34:8), supply our needs (34:9), listen when we talk to him (34:15), help us through our troubles (34:19), and redeem us (34:22), **IF** we cry out to him (34:4, 6, 17), reverence him (34:7, 10), trust him (34:8), fear him (34:11), watch our tongues and keep from lying (34:13), turn from sin, do good, and seek peace (34:14), have humble hearts (34:18), and serve him (34:22)" (p. 842).

Second, let's look at Paul's guidelines for those who receive revelation from God in 1 Cor 14:29-33a (and I would define some of those communications from God as "God making known to us what we did not know or could not have known through our natural senses" [Deere, *Beginner's Guide to the Gift of Prophecy*, 45]). In a corporate setting, Paul's intent is that such revelations be communicated to the church or individuals in the church (and in other contexts outside the church to individuals or groups gathered for whatever purpose).¹ Paul's guidelines, given the problems he faced at Corinth, show that God's sovereignty and human responsibility coexist or work together. It is not one or the other. Paul says that revelations *do* come—they are *downloaded*--to recipients (so God *is* the source of them) so that they all can prophesy one by one. He also adds that "the spirits of prophets are subject to prophets" (v. 32). But what does this mean? In this verse, "spirits" is a figure of speech involving substitution where "the Spirit" who gives spiritual gifts is put or substituted for the "spiritual gifts" that the Spirit gives. Paul is saying that gifts given by the Spirit are under the believer's control. Christian prophecy, namely revelations or thoughts that come from the Spirit of God and *not* a counterfeit spirit (1 Cor 12:1-3; Matt 7:15-23), unlike first-century pagan prophecy, was not ecstatic and uncontrollable. The believer can choose to speak what is made known to him or her, can decide how to best communicate the thought or picture that comes to mind, and can start and stop when they decide. As Craig Keener says in his *IVP Bible Background Commentary: NT*: "For Paul, . . . inspiration can be regulated, and regulating the timing and manner of one's utterance is not the same as quenching it altogether. On regulating one's spirit, cf. Proverbs 16:32 and 25:28."

Along with this second point, we should add that Paul does not just say to sit back and "be open" to communications from the Spirit of God. "Being open" to such revelations appears to be too passive in Paul's view. Three times he says the equivalent of "eagerly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy" (1 Cor 14:1, ESV; cf. 12:31; 14:39), and in 1 Cor 14:13 he encourages the tongues speaker who does not have the gift of interpretation to pray for this gift if he or she speaks in tongues during the worship service. Why? Because God desires that tongues spoken *in church* be intelligible;

¹ For a good example of this, see the story of Klaus Issler when he was "deeply touched" and ministered to at conference where people could sign up to be prayed over by a team of four people for about fifteen minutes (J. P. Moreland and Klaus Issler, *In Search of a Confident Faith* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2008], 185). He and Moreland have taken similar training and now participate on teams to pray for others at their church.

he wants these charismatic praises and thanksgivings to be interpreted for the benefit of all those who are listening (1 Cor 14:16-19; cf Acts 2:11; 10:46).

There *is* a kind of paradox in the NT when Paul, for example, says that all these gifts and Spirit manifestations or workings are *from God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit* (1 Cor 12:4-11), and then in the same discourse tells believers to *eagerly seek them*. Here is what NT theologian I. Howard Marshall says about this dynamic in our relationship with the Lord, one that can move forward or stay stagnant or even move backwards depending on our pursuit of Him: “the New Testament seems at times to ascribe whatever happens in the illumination, conversion and spiritual progress of believers to the Spirit and at other times to recognize their personal responsibility and ability” (I. H. Marshall, *New Testament Theology* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004], 274, n. 34). Paul even says to the somewhat timid Timothy: “Do not neglect your gift, which was given you through prophecy when the body of elders laid their hands on you” (1 Tim 4:14); and he later has to say in 2 Tim 1:6-7: “For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands. ⁷For the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and self-discipline.” So it is correct to say that God is sovereign; it is also correct to say that we are responsible.²

Third, consider the parable of the friend at midnight immediately following the Lord’s prayer in Luke (11:1-13). In this parable, a friend goes to another friend at midnight seeking from him some bread (Jesus had just taught about prayer for “daily bread” in 11:3). He did this because a friend of his had just arrived from a long journey and has a need. The parable appears to teach that God will provide for the needs of others through us if we go to him and persistently ask for his help. This is fascinating. Keener says about vv. 9-10: “In the context of the parable, these verses mean that the knocker receives because of boldness or because the honor of God is inseparably connected with the honor of his servant, the knocker.” Either way, this parable talks about going to our God and repeatedly asking him for something that will meet a need, and the Lord will decide how to grant it.

Finally, the parable of the talents in Matt 25:14-30 teaches that we cannot be passive and sit back with the gifts and spiritual resources God has given us. “One implication of the parable of the talents is that the Christian life involves risk (Matthew 25:14-20). How else could the two servants engage in business and double the money entrusted to them? Wise risks are part and parcel of the life of God-confidence. The writer of the Hebrews says it this way: ‘And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him’ (Hebrews 11:6). God rewards our steps of trusting to seek him and his kingdom (Matthew 6:33)” (Moreland and Issler, *In Search of a Confident Faith*, 129). Faith, as others have said, can be spelled “R.I.S.K.” Indeed, Jesus appears to get excited about the faith of those who took amazing risks--socially improper actions--to lay hold of the power of God that worked in him as people heard the message of forgiveness that he freely offered. Consider the leper (Mark 1:40-41), the four friends of the paralytic (Mark 2:1-12), the woman with the hemorrhage (Luke 8:40-48), the Syrophoenician woman (Mark 7:24-30), the woman in the house of Simon the Pharisee (Luke 7:36-50), and the persistence of blind Bartimaeus in the face of those who rebuked him and told him to be quiet (Mark 10:46-52).

² What I am talking about in this paper has been be variously described as “Empowered Evangelicalism,” “Experiential Calvinism” (<http://www.calvinistcorner.com/gifts.htm>), and “charismatic Calvinism.” Cf. Rich Nathan and Ken Wilson, *Empowered Evangelical: Bringing Together the Best of the Evangelical and Charismatic Worlds* (Foreward by J. I. Packer. Ann Arbor, MI: Servant Publications, 1995); Sam Storms, *Convergence: Spiritual Journeys of a Charismatic Calvinist* (Kansas City, MO: Enjoying God Ministries, 2005). See also <http://www.sovereigngraceministries.org/>.

Much more could be said, but I think this is enough to motivate us to keep pursuing the Lord and learning how to hear his voice so we can speak “to people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation” (1 Cor 14:3). This is what fellow-believers need most in discouraging times. Those who feel that it is more spiritual or more God-honoring if we do *not* seek or pursue personal communications from him (whether for ourselves or for others) are reading the Scriptures within a framework that selectively filters out many passages that actually *encourage* us to ask . . . seek . . . and knock. Our heavenly Father is far more generous than even the best of earthly fathers. We should keep this in mind as we come before him with our needs and the needs of others (cf. Matt 7:9-11).