

# KNOWING GOD

# 2

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## GOD AS COMMUNICATOR

### **Background from the Author**

Given that God and people are ubiquitous in the Bible, instances of God communicating with people occur with great frequency. Session 2 is therefore a ready opportunity to utilize texts that should become familiar to all students of the Bible. The subject will be open-ended, for it will recur throughout the remaining sessions of this course.

There are a lot of Bible references and not a lot of resource commentary. Emphasis should fall on the texts themselves. Most of them are narrative, so they should carry along their own interest. Several of the stories could lead to deep discussion. You will have to decide how far and how long such sidebars should go.

We need to emphasize the significance of the matter-of-fact statement *the LORD said*. It is an indication of how real the presence of God was to these ancient people. Perhaps it helps us understand why Jesus taught his disciples to address God as *our Father*.

The variety of ways in which God communicates in the Old Testament opens a series of interesting matters. Some of these involve stories that are important to biblical literacy. You will have to ration your time while also gauging the interests of the group.

Because it has come up for the second time, you should be sure the significance of the name “Yahweh” is understood: it is the special name for God given to the Hebrew people.

This name occurs more than 6000 times in the Old Testament. The translation in English versions is a story in itself. "LORD" is well known from the King James Version. Although "Lord" is inescapably a masculine title, the New Revised Standard Version and some other versions stay with it because of the long tradition and because of the extreme difficulty of working around it. The New Jerusalem Bible uses "Yahweh," but that is not likely to become popular.

Some time after the exile, Jews began to substitute *adonai*, the word for "Lord," when reading the text. This led to the use of the Greek word for "Lord," in the New Testament. The consonants of *adonai* combined with YHWH gave early rise to the hybrid English name "Jehovah." Some of this information will appear in the *Resource Book*, Session 3, so you need not elaborate here.

## SESSION PLANS

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### *Learning Objectives*

This session is intended to enable participants to:

1. Retell 3-5 biblical stories about God's communication with people.
2. Identify several ways God communicated with Old Testament figures.
3. State what they believe about how God communicates with people.
4. Discuss ways to become more open and attuned to communication from God.

### *Resources You May Need*

Chalkboard or newsprint and markers

3 x 5 cards

Hymnals

CD or audiocassette of "Day by Day" and player

## ***Leadership Strategy***

### SETTING THE STAGE

**1. “Thumbs Up.”** Invite participants to respond to the following statements by turning thumbs up if the statement is true for them; thumbs down if the statement is not true for them; and thumbs in neutral (palms parallel to the ground) if they are unsure of their responses. Do not allow any discussion or linger too long on any one statement.

- You have seen God in a dream or vision.
- You have had the experience of seeing or hearing God directly.
- You have had a strong sense of God’s presence with you at some time in your life.
- You have had a strong sense of God’s comforting you during a time of stress or pain.
- You have had a strong sense of God’s correction or displeasure.
- You have had a strong sense of God’s urging you to do a particular thing.
- You have argued with God.
- You have felt a strong sense of God’s presence through another person.
- You have felt a strong sense of God’s speaking to you through the words of Scripture.
- You have felt a strong sense of God’s presence through art or music.
- You have felt a strong sense of God’s presence through nature.
- You have felt a strong sense of God’s presence in prayer.
- When you pray, you talk more than you listen. (5 minutes)

**or**

**“God Said.”** Ask “What did you think or would you think if someone said to you, ‘God told me . . . (such and such)’?” List the responses on the chalkboard or

newsprint as they are given. Ask, "What makes it hard for us to accept this kind of language today?" Then ask the group to think of words or phrases we might be more likely to use today to describe a communication or direction that comes from beyond ourselves. (e.g. "I just knew that was the thing to do," or "A little voice told me," or "Something just pushed me into it.") List these responses as well. (5 minutes)

- 2. Introducing the Theme.** Observe that if they were to use a concordance to identify all the times the phrase "God said" or "The Lord said" appears in the Bible, the list would be many pages long. Read or paraphrase this statement from the *Resource Book*: "We are not told [in the Bible] just how God spoke, and we do not know just how the earliest readers of these texts understood the way God spoke. The language is anthropomorphic . . . but there is never a doubt that it is indeed the Lord who is speaking with them" (page 9). Conclude by noting that today's session will focus on biblical stories that portray God as one who communicates with people of faith in a variety of ways. (5 minutes)

### EXPLORING THE SCRIPTURE

- 1. Retelling Stories.** Ahead of time, copy the following Bible references onto separate 3 x 5 cards or slips of paper:

<b>Genesis 18:1-14</b>	God's promise of a son to Abraham and Sarah
<b>Genesis 32:22-32</b>	Jacob wrestling with the angel
<b>Exodus 3:1-17</b>	God's call to Moses at the burning bush
<b>Numbers 12:6-8</b>	God's face-to-face conversation with Moses
<b>Judges 6:11-29</b>	God's call to Gideon
<b>1 Samuel 3:1-11</b>	God's call to Samuel
<b>1 Kings 19:1-15</b>	Elijah at Mt. Horeb
<b>Isaiah 6:1-9</b>	God's call to Isaiah

Title three columns on chalkboard or newsprint

**Person(s) Addressed      Means of Communication      Central Message**

Depending upon the size and personality of your group and the time available, choose from among the options below to retell some or all of the stories. As each story is told, list information from it in the appropriate column.

**a. Role Plays.** Ahead of time, ask volunteers to plan to present a first-person account of each story from the perspective of the person who was addressed by God. After each person tells the story, have the group suggest items for each of the three columns. (10 minutes)

**or**

**b. Diary Entries.** Divide into small groups and assign each group one of the passages. Each group is to prepare a diary entry which might have been written at the end of the day by the person addressed by God in its passage. After each entry is shared, have the group suggest items for each of the three columns. (25 minutes)

**or**

**c. Small-Group Summaries.** Divide into “instant groups” by asking the participants to join with one to three people seated near them. After a few minutes, ask spokespersons from each group to summarize their stories and suggest items for the three columns. (20 minutes)

**2. Discussion.** After the biblical stories have been retold in one of the methods described above, invite the group to think about the ways God communicates with people today. The discussion may focus on some of the following questions:

- Does God still communicate with people today?
- If so, how? If not, why not?
- Looking back at the central messages God conveyed to Old Testament figures according to the chart created in “Exploring the Scripture” #1, what groups of people need to hear these messages today? (10 minutes)

- 3. Personal Experiences.** In groups of 4-7, invite those who are willing to do so to tell about times when they experienced a strong sense of God's presence. How was that presence experienced? What was communicated? After about 15 minutes, bring the whole group together. Ask, "How do we test the validity of directions or insights that we believe to be divine communication?" "How can we be more open and attuned to communications from God?" (25 minutes)

**or**

**Reframing Stories of Personal Decision.** Ask the participants to think of important personal decisions they have made that had good outcomes. Encourage them to recall factors or influences that caused them to make those particular decisions. Then challenge them to think for a few minutes about how they might retell the stories of those decisions through the lens of biblical faith, including God as an active participant in their decision-making processes. For example, they might say, "Then God said . . ." or "An angel told me . . ." (even if that kind of "God language" is not typical for them). Invite them to tell the "God language" version of their story in groups of 2 or 3. After 8-10 minutes, lead the whole group in a discussion using some of the following questions:

- How did you feel about this version of the story?
  - What barriers hinder us from hearing God speak to us?
  - How can we be more open and attuned to hearing the voice of God?
- (15-20 minutes)

### CLOSING

**Guided Meditation.** Invite the participants to get into a comfortable position, to relax, and to close their eyes. Suggest that they focus on their breathing, making it as regular as they can. Help them do this by softly repeating several times, "Breathe in and breathe out . . . breathe in and breathe out." After a minute or two of relaxed breathing, read "A Guided Meditation" located at the end of this session. Speak softly (but loud enough to be heard easily), and speak very slowly. (8 minutes)

**and/or**

**A Hymn.** Sing or say “Come, Thou Font of Every Blessing,” “Dear Lord and Father of Mankind,” “Guide Me O Thou Great Jehovah,” or another familiar hymn that expresses openness to divine communication. (3 minutes)

**or**

**Day by Day.** Sing “Day by Day” if you have chosen it as your “theme song.” (3 minutes)

**and/or**

**Prayer.** Close with your own prayer or use the following prayer:

**Gracious, life-giving God, who spoke to the prophets of old giving them assurances of your deliverance and your saving presence, help us to hear your voice today so that we may know how to love you and to serve you in this time and place. Open o u r hearts, minds, and spirits to the still small voice that seeks us still. Amen.** (2 minutes)

### ***Looking Ahead***

The next session (in Setting the Stage #2) suggests that you give a brief explanation of the 3-tiered Old Testament universe. You may want to photocopy an illustration from a Bible Dictionary or to draw a free-hand illustration on chalkboard or newsprint.

Exploring the Scripture #3 will work most smoothly if you provide different colored slips of paper for each group. Your church office may have a variety of colored paper.

The Closing suggests playing a CD or audiocassette suitable for meditation. If you choose this option, check ahead of time to be sure that the CD or tape player you will use is working properly and is set at an appropriate volume.

## A Guided Meditation

Based on 1 Kings 10

Let's think about Elijah for a few minutes . . . you don't have to work at this . . . just keep your breathing deep and regular, and I will guide you through it. Keep breathing in and out . . . in and out. (Pause.) Elijah had been very zealous for the Lord, . . . perhaps he was even taking God's power at work in him for granted. We don't know that, but at the beginning of our story, Elijah was feeling lonely and afraid, defeated and discouraged. (Pause) Think of a place or time in your own life—it can be in the present or in the past—when you have felt lonely, afraid, defeated or discouraged. Allow yourself to recall those feelings now . . . what you were thinking and how you were feeling. (Pause)

As many of us do when we are depressed, Elijah went to sleep. He was awakened by an angel who told him to arise and eat, and he found a bread cake and a jar of water by his head. Can you think of a time when another person brought you nourishment and comfort in the midst of your discouragement and despair? (Pause) Think about that person now and imagine that he or she was God's angel sent to encourage you and to give you strength. (Pause). Take a moment to thank God for that angel in your life. (Pause) Maybe there have been other angels that have ministered to you. Bathe yourself for a moment in the care of those angels as you continue breathing in and out. (Pause)

After being rested and nourished, Elijah felt his energy renewed. He set out on a long journey, a kind of pilgrimage, to Mt. Horeb, a place where he felt certain he would find God again. Where do you find God? Think of a place where you feel close to God. It can be real or imaginary, any setting where you can feel the presence of God. In your mind's eye, take yourself to that place now. (Pause)

At Mt. Horeb, Elijah told God exactly how he was feeling; he poured out his heart about his fear and his disappointment and his loneliness, about how things did not turn out the way he had expected. Take a few minutes now to tell God about your disappointed expectations, about your fears for the future, about anything that is weighing you down. (Longer pause) Now listen for what God is trying to tell you about these things. (Pause) Elijah found God in that Holy place, but not in the way or form he had expected. God



wasn't in wind or earthquake or fire, which were all means through which God had been known to him and to others in the past. On that day, Elijah experienced God's presence as a "still small voice." In what ways have you heard the voice of God in unexpected ways? When might you have failed to recognize God's word or presence because it came in nontraditional form? Think about how God might, even now, be trying to communicate with you in a new way? (Pause)

After Elijah had told God all his fears and complaints, God gave him new things to do. What might God be calling or sending you to do in your life now, even though you might feel as if your platter is pretty full already or your cup is kind of empty? Think about how God could be challenging you to leave old issues behind and to head in new directions. Listen now for God's voice. (Pause). Elijah left that holy place with a renewed sense of purpose and direction. He began to empower those who would continue his prophetic ministry after he was gone. Our faith journeys are linked to those of others. God needs each one of us to communicate to others God's holy will and vision. Take a moment now to give thanks to God that you are part of this ongoing story of redemption and love. (Pause). And now, when you are ready, you may gradually come back to this present place and slowly open your eyes.