

***Knowing God in the Real World***

**by Jon Paulien (Pacific Press, 2000)**

**Chapter Four**

***“Impressions, Impressions”***

For many Christians the greatest barrier to developing a living relationship with God is the lack of consistency in personal, private prayer. We have touched on this issue in the previous chapter. This is the first of two chapters in which we will examine some difficult issues in relation to prayer. The focus of this chapter is God's answers to prayer. A major disincentive to consistent prayer is the sense that it is only one-way communication. We talk to God, but He never answers back. Or does He? How can we know God's answers to our prayers? Does God still speak with a living voice today or do we need to guess His will through the chain of circumstances that follow prayer? Would you know God's voice if you heard it? Could you pick His voice out from amidst the many voices which assault us in today's world?

Suppose you are a farmer. One day you are standing in your fields with your foot up on the front tire of your tractor. You look over the fields with satisfaction; it's good land; you've worked it hard over the years; it doesn't get much better than this. Suddenly you hear a voice

behind you saying, "Plant corn instead of wheat this year." Would you do it? If you knew without a doubt that it was the voice of God, would you plant corn? But how would you know?

Suppose you are a single mother juggling a job and three children. It seems that you never have a moment's rest. Then one day you hear a voice behind you saying, "Invite your elderly parents to move in." Would you do it? If you knew without a doubt that it was the voice of God, would you do it? But how would you know for sure?

Suppose you are a lay person in a local church. God has blessed you through the years in your attempts to serve the church. You have been faithful in tithes and offerings. But then one day a voice behind you says, "Sell all that you have and give it to ADRA to feed the hungry." Would you do it? If you knew without a doubt that it was the voice of God, would you do it? But how would you know? If God spoke to you today, would you know it was God?

I remember an elderly rancher. He'd been quite successful. In fact, he had one of the largest ranches in his country. In his old age all of his hopes for the future were settled on his son. Early one morning he was awakened by a voice that said, "Take your only son up to that hilltop twenty miles north of you, stab him to death, and then set fire to him." If you had been that rancher, would you have done it? If you knew that God was the One telling you to do this, would you do it? How would you know?

How did Abraham know that this strange request had come directly from God? Frankly, it was a good thing that Abraham wasn't a Seventh-day Adventist because if he was, he probably wouldn't have gone to Mount Moriah. A committed Seventh-day Adventist would have compared what the voice said with the Scriptures and would have concluded, "This is not from God." You see, what the voice was telling him to do was contrary to the sixth commandment.

Not only that, the prophets reveal that to sacrifice one's son is an abomination unto the Lord. A good Adventist would be led to conclude that the voice was obviously not God's voice. There's only one problem. It was the voice of God!

How did Abraham know that the voice which told him to do something contrary to the will of God was from God? I suspect that Abraham, in his long life, had done a lot of walking and talking with God. He had come to know when God was communicating with him and when it was simply his own inner feelings or some other influence. Abraham had experimented with God. He had tested his impressions. He had practiced what he had heard. And he had figured out when it was God speaking and when it was not.

God is probably not going to ask you to do anything similar to what He asked Abraham to do. Only someone with a lifetime's experience of walking with God could possibly have responded the way Abraham did to God's request. God knew who He was dealing with. Abraham proved faithful to God, even in a tortured and perplexing situation. Through his example, God was able to teach the whole universe something special about His plan of salvation (see Patriarchs and Prophets, pp. 153-155). There is no telling what God can do with someone who is open to His voice.

### **A Living Relationship With God**

If we would like to have the kind of relationship with God that Abraham did, then we need to learn to recognize and know God's voice in our everyday lives. I suggest that there are only two kinds of Christian living. One kind could be described as "going through the motions," the other is based on a genuine, living experience with God.

“Going through the motions” is like having one’s spiritual life on “auto pilot.” You go to church on Sabbath morning. God is being worshiped, but your mind is on auto pilot. You go through the hymns on auto pilot. During the prayer you’re thinking about the afternoon. And how could anyone listen to a sermon while wrestling to keep the kids from disturbing everyone else? Forget it! Auto pilot in the spiritual life can easily become a way of life.

Is your Christian life on auto pilot? Do you do the Christian thing because your parents do it? Because your family does it? Because your best friends do it? Over the years as a pastor I came to recognize that a high percentage of men in particular were in church mostly because their family attended. There was no strong personal commitment.

Do you go to church simply because it’s a habit? Because you grew up doing it, and so you continue doing it? Does life get interesting for you only when you are at your job, or on the golf course, or at the mall— doing something of a secular nature? Is that where you feel the most alive and involved with life?

I would suggest that the only kind of Christian living that matters is the second kind, a genuine living experience with God. You know that God exists, and you know that He is with you, and you know that you can share your deepest needs and concerns with Him. And you know that He will do the same with you. A living, genuine relationship with God is the basis for the only kind of Christianity that really matters.

### **What To Do With Impressions**

In the previous chapter we have seen that careful study, prayer, an integrated lifestyle, and the sharing of our faith are the best ways to counteract secular drift. But one further element of

Christian experience is often left out of Adventist discussions of the subject. A crucial foundation to a living walk with God is understanding what to do with impressions. What do you do when you sense that God is trying to get through to you personally? How seriously can you take impressions to say and do and believe things, especially when the impression deals with an issue not addressed in Scripture?

I'm not talking about audible voices here. If you were to tell me that you hear audible voices all the time, I would listen to you but I would be a little concerned. When I talk about impressions I have had I am not making any special claim to God's favor. I don't hear audible voices and I don't believe that my experience with God is in any way unusual. Yet I've come to know by experience that God is capable of communicating with us even though no audible voice is heard, even though no angelic figure is seen. The Bible suggests that God wants to communicate with us directly, so when we pay attention to God's voice outside of Scripture, we are being faithful to Scripture.

Being attentive to God's voice is vital to a living relationship with Him. Frankly, while the Bible and the Spirit of Prophecy are essential guides to Christian life, they don't specifically cover most situations in life. No direct and specific message in inspiration covers most of the detailed decisions you face on an average day. Does the Bible, for example, tell you who would be the best person for you to marry? Does it tell you where you should live? Does it tell you what kind of job you should seek, or what kind of education you should get? Biblical principles certainly apply to the decision-making process in such situations, but the actual choice is usually left up to us.

Many of the most crucial everyday decisions of life are, therefore, not governed by a

direct word from God in Scripture or the Spirit of Prophecy. Not everyone is willing to accept this. It is tempting to use a variety of interpretive approaches to discover direct counsel for daily existence out of the Bible and the Spirit of Prophecy. The result is often to make both the Bible and the Spirit of Prophecy say things that the authors themselves would never have recognized. I do believe, however, that God would like to guide us in the most critical decisions of life. These decisions would be based on the principles of Scripture and the Spirit of Prophecy. But beyond these principles, God would like to offer us guidance in very specific and direct ways. He would also like to warn us of personal spiritual and physical dangers.

Take my experience at Lost Lake Wilderness, for example. Lost Lake the location of one of the camp meeting programs for the Upper Columbia Conference. It was about 35 miles from the nearest small town and about 15 miles from the nearest road on my map of the state of Washington. I was scheduled to speak at that camp meeting a few years ago.

I like the change of pace that traveling provides. I like seeing new places and meeting new people. So normally when a trip is coming up, I am looking forward to it with a certain amount of anticipation. But that wasn't the case this time. Instead there was a general sense of unease, almost dread, and I just couldn't figure out what it was. Why was it that every fiber of my being was saying that I didn't want to go on this trip?

Once we were packed and started heading out toward Lost Lake through Indiana, Illinois, Wisconsin, Minnesota and South Dakota, the sense of general unease began to crystalize into a more specific sense of danger on the highway. I didn't say anything about my feelings to anyone else in the family, I just became a little more alert while driving and a little more careful than usual. I also didn't complain that my wife was content to let me do most of the driving!

Things passed fairly uneventfully until we reached the mountains of western Montana. The interstate highway began to climb into the Bitterroot Mountains. My van is very reliable but it has a little 4 cylinder engine which slowed us to about 25 miles per hour on the steep upward grade. At one point a truck came along behind me, moving just slightly faster than I was. He pulled out to pass and when he got alongside me, the road flattened out a bit and my van surged forward. We seesawed back and forth for a minute or so, sometimes the truck was gaining on me, and then the van would regain some of the ground. Suddenly I saw yellow flashes of light to my left. I realized that the driver of the truck had lost track of my presence next to him. He was signaling his intention to move over into my lane. I honked my horn but his engine was much too noisy for him to hear me. As he started to pull over into my lane I honked the horn again, but was eventually forced right off the highway. I slowed down on the sloping grass next to the road, kept control of the van and then pulled back onto the highway. Later on, when the road leveled off again, I caught up with him and cranked it up to about 85 miles an hour in order to pass him quickly. I wasn't taking any more chances with his lane changes!

I seriously doubt that he was ever aware that he had run us off the road. The interesting thing is that 200 yards past the point where we were forced off there was a guard rail. Had he pulled over at that point, there would have been no place for us to go. We would have been crushed against the guard rail or possibly even knocked over it and down the embankment. After this incident I finally told my wife about my impression of danger on the highway.

Her response was, "Well in that case we had better be REAL careful from now on."

But I responded, "No, it's over. That was what the Lord was trying to warn me about. Everything will be OK now."

I was sensing a total release of anxiety that was just as real as the previous impression of danger. I somehow knew that the danger was past and that the rest of the trip would be reasonably uneventful. I was totally thankful for a God who cares enough and is able enough to give us advance warning about things like.

I do not wish to imply that God will always warn us or protect us. When bad things happens to God's people, it doesn't necessarily mean that they did something wrong or were being punished. Ironically, it was on the way home from that very same trip that I was happily driving along through South Dakota with my speed control set at 65 miles per hour (the exact speed limit for that stretch of road). To this day I wonder why God gave me no advance warning about the policeman whose radar was calibrated (whether intentionally or unintentionally) at 12 miles over the actual speed. Though my speedometer said that I was traveling a steady 65 with speed control (that part of South Dakota is very flat), his radar machine said I was traveling 77. And he had absolutely no sense of mercy. It turned out to be a very expensive traffic stop for me, even though I had obeyed the law completely, at least to the best of my knowledge. I plan to ask the Lord about this incident during the millennium. But if I have to choose, I would prefer to be warned about inattentive truckers than about mistaken or fund-raising policemen.

These incidents and others have led me to believe that God is very real and very down to earth. He is not fully consumed with running the universe, He would also like to be more involved in the day to day activities of our lives. And He seems to be just as willing to communicate with us today as He was with people back in Bible times.

## Some Words of Caution

The idea that God would use impressions to communicate with us can be difficult for Adventists to accept, however. As Adventists we are leery of impressions. We fear the excesses of Pentecostalism, and with good reason. Charismatic Christians often seem to take their “spirit” far more seriously than the Scriptures. On one occasion I attended a pentecostal church where the name of Jesus was used and much earnestness reigned, yet I could sense the presence of the demonic. It is possible for people to be praising God with their mouths and worshiping the devil at the same time without knowing it. So experience provides plenty of reason to be concerned about impressions.

Texts like Gal.1:8-9 offer a significant balance to what we learn from the experience of Abraham.

“But even if we,  
or an angel from heaven,  
should preach a different gospel to you  
than the one we preached,  
let him be anathema.

As I have already said before,  
and repeat again now,  
if anyone should preach a different gospel to you  
than the one you received,  
let him be anathema.”

Galatians 1:8-9

Paul implies here that impressions (like angels and preachers) can lead us contrary to the clear teachings of God. Satan can come to us in the guise of an angel of light (2 Cor 11:14-15). No matter what the source, we should never accept an impression that leads us contrary to what we already know to be right.

After all, impressions can come from different sources. Impressions can come from God,

designed to help us navigate through a variety of situations in life. But Satan can also give us impressions; we often call them temptations. Therefore, it's very important to be able to recognize whether God or Satan is speaking to us at a given time and place.

But many impressions come from neither God nor Satan. Some impressions may arise from the murky depths of our own inner selves. Still others may reflect the expectations of other people. If we want to be attentive to God's inner voice, we need to be able to recognize the difference between these various kinds of impressions.

Regardless of whether they come from Satan, from some sort of inner fog, or from the expectations of others, impressions can lead you contrary to Scripture. With the exception of unusual circumstances like that of Abraham, impressions should never supercede Scripture. Here is an illustration: One day a friend called me up and said that he needed to see me. Since I had moved to another part of the country he had to drive a considerable distance to meet with me. When he came, he had a woman with him who was not his wife. They were conservative Adventists. They wanted to do the right thing, but they had become convinced that they had each married the wrong person and that God intended for them to be together in eternity. They had prayed about the situation and wanted to know whether it would be appropriate to exercise their "heavenly marriage rights" now or whether they needed to wait until they got to heaven to be married. I told them as kindly as I know how that an impression to be unfaithful to your spouse is not from God. It's as simple as that. Impressions can lead you contrary to Scripture, but such impressions should be immediately discarded in nearly every situation..

Impressions can also lead you contrary to the way that God has made you. If a person with absolutely no stage presence felt impressed to become a comedian, I would be inclined to

doubt that God was the source of that impression. If a person with no interest in details and few leadership skills felt impressed to become an administrator, I would question the source of the impression. If a motormouth who can't read felt impressed to become a librarian, I would question the source of the impression. God has designed people in many different ways. We will be happiest and serve best when we are doing what God designed us to do.

Some people get energized by being with other people, others feel wiped out by the same kind of contact. When introverts have been subjected to a really major party, they usually have to go home afterward, pull the shades, and lay down in a dark room for a while to get their strength back. It breaks my heart to see people struggling to serve God in ways contrary to the way He "wired them up." So much energy is wasting merely "surviving." Beware of impressions that lead you contrary to the way God made you.

Impressions can also lead you into self-promoting and self-serving actions. You can feel impressed that tooting your own horn is the will of God. You may feel impressed that you have the absolute solution to some problem in the church. Yet in acting to resolve the problem, you may find out that you are simply exercising your own personal need for power and control. Destructive actions can seem very high and noble when they are backed up by strong impressions of the will of God.

Let us not, therefore, lose our sense of spiritual balance simply because Abraham had a very unusual experience with the voice of God. Impressions need to be handled with great care. The dangers that come along with impressions must not, however, cause us to lose out on the fantastic blessings that come from a living walk with God. For Christians living in a secular world there is no substitute for a living relationship with God. Such a relationship is the best

safeguard against secular drift. Such a relationship is also vital to any outreach to secular people. Secular people have been “trained” to overlook God whenever they encounter Him in the church, on religious television, or in religious books. For many secular people, the only clear picture of God they will ever see is His living presence in another person’s life. “Hearing God” makes Him real, not only to us, but also to those who have not known Him.

### **The “How To” Of Dealing With Impressions**

For our charismatic Christian friends the danger is placing feelings above the clear teachings of Scripture. On the other hand, many Adventists are so leery of emotional “experience” that they would rather live without any sense of God’s presence than to risk making a mistake in judgment now and then. Here then is the challenge: How can we learn to know God’s voice without falling into the pit of going contrary to Scripture or contrary to the way God made us? I believe that there are some practical ways to accomplish this.

Allow me to expand on one of my prayer suggestions from the previous chapter. I noted that while we are accustomed to speaking to God in prayer, we rarely take the time to listen for His response. Try this process a few times. When you are ready to pray, take a pencil and paper with you. When you are finished remain in position and wait quietly. Write down whatever thoughts and ideas come to your mind over the next five to ten minutes. This is sort of like spiritual brainstorming. When is God more likely to impress you with an idea than when you are already in an attitude of prayerful attention?

Now when I do this, I discover that a large percentage of the thoughts and ideas that pass through my mind are irrelevant to my life at that point. Some of them may be downright silly, as

is fairly typical with any brainstorming process. But some of the thoughts that come to me are promising. I pass them through the filter of Scripture, as far as I understand it, and eliminate all ideas that are contrary to God's word. What do I do with the rest? Test them out and observe the results. If you feel impressed to visit someone, visit them! If you feel impressed to make a phone call, make it! If you feel impressed to go shopping in a particular place, go there and see what happens.

Whether or not an impression is from God can be discerned by the results of trying out the impressions that come to us. When you look back on your experiences in the past you can often tell when God was leading and when you were going your own way. Reviewing your responses to various impressions, and the results that come about, can sharpen your sense of how God leads you personally.

Let's suppose that I feel impressed that certain people need to be contacted or prayed with. Suppose that when I contact these people they keep remarking about the exceptional timing of the contact, or how badly they needed a visit right then. Suppose that wherever I go that day, people are blessed and the kingdom of God is advanced. This would suggest to me that God's hand was clearly behind the impressions that led me to do good at just the right time. God has given me many days like that and it feels so good!! I am almost blown away by the sense of purpose and fulfillment I get to know that there is a living God, who cares enough to guide me in even the minor details of life.

But things don't always work out that way. Sometimes I feel impressed to make calls or visits and the reaction is less positive. People may scratch their heads and have no idea why God might want me to contact them just then. The contact may even get me or them into trouble.

Sometimes I feel impressed to do something special for a member of my family, only to discover that I had missed the mark widely! When the results of a particular impression do not work out for good, that impression likely came from a source other than God.

The key, then, is to try out your impressions, or at least the ones that aren't obviously stupid or contrary to the Bible. Experiment with them. Keep track of the results. Over time, you will gradually learn to distinguish the voice of God from some of the other voices in your head. You will find that God assumes a certain way of speaking with you, one that you gradually come to recognize and to trust. You may discover that His voice comes to you with a particular "accent." To gain this recognition will not come easily. It takes time and careful attention. But the joy that comes with the leadings of God is well worth the time and effort. God cares about the many areas of your life that are not directly governed by Scripture. And others are benefitted by our sensitivity to Him as well.

On many occasions I've wanted to help someone but sensed that it might do more harm than good. For maximum effect help must come at the right time, in the right place, and in the right way. Being sensitive to God's leading can make a major difference with this. Scripture does not tell us whom and when to visit. God is willing to help us know when and how to approach people, but we need to be tuned in to His voice.

Ellen G. White states, "We have nothing to fear for the future except we forget how the Lord has led us in the past." Have you ever thought of extending this principle to your own life and experience? As you see how the Lord has led you in your own past, you will gain confidence to know that He will lead you also in the future. Perhaps I can share an additional couple of experiences from my own past in which I have been absolutely certain that God was leading me.

## **Finding the Right One**

One of the areas where God's leading is critical is in the area of marriage. Many people venture into marriage "by faith" only to discover, often all too soon, that they made a big mistake. In my case, I looked for the right one all the way through college, but nothing permanent ever clicked. I was a pretty lonely guy when I graduated because I was leaving all the girls behind, and I was going out to pastor in an area where "little old ladies" were par for the course. The church I was assigned to relegated me to the experience of four lonely walls at home and about 15 elderly folk at prayer meeting, there was no real social life for a 23-year-old.

My first interview with the conference president didn't help. For fifteen minutes he lectured me that he liked his pastors to be married. Then he changed course and warned me for another fifteen minutes that he didn't approve of dating ministers! Go figure! By Friday of my first week things were pretty depressing.

On that Friday afternoon the senior pastor called and told me that he was giving a Bible study that night in a dangerous part of town. He said he wouldn't mind some company if I had some time free. Happy for a chance to get away from the lonely apartment, I agreed to meet him at his house at 6 PM. On our way to the Bible study, he made a stop in a neighborhood that seemed different than the one he had told me about.

He said, "We have a little extra time so I thought we could drop in on Pam for a few minutes."

"Who's Pam?"

"That's an interesting question. About two months ago she just walked off the street one Sabbath and announced that she had found the church in the phone book. She's been coming

ever since, and I think she might be interested in being baptized soon.”

So we went up to Pam’s apartment and met her. She was in her late teens. She was dressed very casually, and at first sight I wasn’t particularly impressed with her. When I saw her dressed up for church the next day, however, I was quite a bit more impressed. Three days later I was out visiting with the pastor again. He mentioned his plan of having a baptism that Sabbath, and he thought we should visit Pam again to find out whether she would like to get baptized as well. We were hardly seated in Pam’s apartment when she took the lead in the conversation.

“I hear that you’re planning to have a baptism this Sabbath.”

“Yes, I think two or three young people are planning to be baptized,” the pastor said.

“Do you think there might be any room for me?” she asked.

Pastors, of course, live for moments like that. But then a strange thing happened (or maybe it’s not so strange). On our way out of her place that day, we all shook hands, which is the pastoral custom. But there was electricity in that handshake for me. I didn’t know what to do with that. It seemed entirely inappropriate for a pastor to feel excitement about a handshake. Months later she admitted that she had felt it too, and wondered if it was appropriate. In any case, I took note of the feeling and our relationship began to grow. I offered her rides home from church (I thought my little German sports car was cool, but she was into Mustangs back then).

The senior pastor quickly discovered that he didn’t have to take Pam home from church anymore. He wisely turned over her continuing Bible studies to me. On Sabbath afternoons we would find all the beautiful parks in New York City and spend time studying the Bible as well as getting to know each other. I’m very grateful that our relationship was centered on the spiritual when we started out. Before long we expanded our time together to include Sundays and a lot of

late talking after prayer meeting on Wednesday nights (it's amazing that none of the old ladies got suspicious about this young lady who started attending prayer meeting after the assistant pastor arrived).

After a few weeks Pam decided to warn me about something. She told me that she had a long history of being interested in a guy for about two months, and then she would suddenly lose interest. I wasn't too worried, because things had gone real well up until then. After all, she was now a Christian, so things should be different. And anyway, I was different from all those other guys (the arrogance of youth)! But Christians are still people and their personalities continue to be affected by their experiences in the past. While God uses our unique personalities for Him, many quirks may continue after conversion. Sure enough, about two months into the relationship I sensed that there was something missing.

We continued seeing each other, but the spark was clearly gone. I tried all the techniques of romance, from fancy restaurants to moonlight walks in the park. Nothing seemed to work. I was plagued with feelings of desperation and I'm sure that it came through in the way I was acting. I loved her and I couldn't bear the thought of losing her.

Shortly after she heard that her great-grandfather had died. She and her mom decided to go to the funeral back in the upper midwest. She had grown up on a farm in North Dakota and had spent most of her life there. After her parents divorced, she eventually followed her mother to New York City. After a year or so in the big city, she longed for some token of home. She found it in church, which reminded her of the "safe haven" that church can provide for children in a mixed-up world. She never did like New York City very much, and talked often about going back to the Midwest for college. So when she and her mom bought one-way plane tickets to

North Dakota for the funeral (back then they were cheaper than round trip fares), I sensed that the relationship was over. At the airport she said good-bye without any enthusiasm. I lamely offered my willingness to pay the way back for both her and her mother, if they decided to return. Then I watched her go down the jetway and out of my life.

I went home to my four lonely walls—angry with God. When I had finally found the right one, He took her away. How dare He tease me like that, only to leave me more alone than ever! After a while, however, it dawned on me that my anger against God was not unanimous inside of me. I wasn't 100% mad at God, but more like 80%. The other 20% of me thought that if a marriage to Pam was not God's will, then it didn't really matter how fantastic she was. To marry someone outside the will of God could only be disastrous. And so a battle raged inside of me. 80% of me wanted her back, no matter what the cost; the other 20% wanted to do God's will, no matter what the cost.

In spite of my offer to bring Pam and her mother back from North Dakota, several days went by without any word from her. My confused and jumbled prayers continued going up to God. A few days later it dawned on me that about 70% of me wanted her back and 30% was saying that God's will was the thing that really mattered to me. After eight or nine days of silence, only 60% of me was saying that I wanted her back and 40% was praying for God's will and for the help I needed to accept it.

I learned a very important lesson during that time. In the Christian walk we are often divided against ourselves. Our full devotion to God is undermined by a variety of voices within, some of which we may not even notice. But I learned that the human will can take hold of even the smallest kernel of faith, direct it toward God, and then, in turn, God will make that faith

grow. Although the impression to place her return in God's hands was my own, I knew it was the right impression even though most of me fought against it. When we place our will behind the impressions we know are from God, growth in character will take place, and our walk with God will become increasingly real.

It was the eleventh day. I was praying by my bed at about 11 o'clock at night (the two elevens make the timing easy to remember). In the middle of that prayer, I became aware that 51% of me wanted to obey God's will no matter what the cost. I told the Lord that even if I never saw Pam again it would be OK. Even if I needed to remain single for the rest of my life, it would be OK. I just wanted to do His will. An incredible sense of peace came over me, a sense of full, complete commitment, a sense that God approved of my decision. I knew that one way or another everything was going to be all right. God was going to be with me, and He would take care of things.

You have to understand that my two previous relationships in college had ended in similar ways. In each case someone I was interested in moved away for a while, and when something came up we never got back together again. For me this was "three strikes and you're out"--a totally devastating experience. What a relief it was to resign the whole concept of a life partner into God's hands! My way wasn't working anyway!

What comes next is not evangelistic exaggeration. I'm sharing with you exactly what took place. As I drew that 11 o'clock prayer to a close, I said in my mind, "In Jesus' name, Amen." At the very instant that the word "amen" passed through my mind, the phone rang. I got up from my knees, walked over to the phone and picked it up. A voice said, "I have a collect call from Pam. Will you accept the charge?" First contact in eleven days. She said something

about her mom and her needing to get back to the City and had I really promised to pay the fare?

Well, needless to say, I was at the door of the local travel agency the minute the door opened the next morning. And I marveled at this incredible token of God's care for our relationship.

There have been days in our marriage when I've been tempted to say it was a mistake (she's had those days, too). I thank God that I have a personal assurance that our marriage has His approval. He has chosen to use this relationship for better or for worse, for richer or poorer, to make me all that I can be for Him. I believe that sometimes God is just waiting to give us the desire of our hearts but holds off because we demand it on our terms. He waits until we are totally dedicated to Him, so that we will receive His gift in a beneficial way. At times our own selfishness may be the biggest obstacle to receiving the very thing we want most.

But there is one more piece to this story. When Pam came back from North Dakota, she didn't have any greater interest in me than she did when she left. She had needed a way back to New York, which she intended to repay. Then she would go on to a nearby SDA college. We remained friends. But the romantic part of our relationship was over in her mind.

I was very confused. What did that 11 o'clock signal mean if it didn't mean God's approval for our eventual marriage? How could that marriage happen if one of us wasn't interested? Our summer ended outside a testing room at Atlantic Union College, where she was registering for studies. I was ready to drive back to New York and go on with my life. She was ready to take a test and get on with her life. We shook hands and said good-bye. I said, "It was a great summer, I will never forget you." I got into the car and drove away. And that was it. Or so it seemed. Thanks to my commitment to God, I was able to close the door and move on without further trauma.

When I got back to New York, I made arrangements to expand my ministry into areas that increased my social opportunities (such as teaching at the academy). I began looking forward to attending the Seminary the following year as an option where God could open up the future. But above all I was content to go at His pace and in His place. Although I felt lonely at times, it felt great to be totally devoted to God.

Then one Saturday night the phone rang. Once again an operator said, "I have a collect call from Pam, will you accept the charge?"

I indicated that I would.

“Oh, it’s you,” I said somewhat matter-of-factly.

Pam had had time to think. She had had time to explore other options. She began thinking that she had lost something that she would regret losing later on. She began feeling she had made a mistake in letting me go. She decided to call and see what was going on in my life. My reply made it clear that I had moved on and was not spending my days thinking about her. She was shocked. No guy had ever walked away from her before. They always got desperate when she pulled away, and that made her even less interested. Now it was her turn to be confused. Without planning it, she felt the attraction starting up again. Now it was her turn to get the fire between us rekindled. And she did a much better job than I did.

Over the next few months, phone calls and visits gradually rebuilt our relationship. Little by little we built a relational foundation that has lasted for decades. But we realize now that the key element was my willingness to let her go. And I could never have done that apart from my

relationship with God. It is only through a living relationship with God that we can have the kind of detachment that truly loves another without keeping them in a cage. Our relationship could never have worked without a strong sensitivity to God's leading. But with God, all things are possible!

### **How to Serve?**

With regard to the issue of a life partner, a healthy experience with impressions is critical. When it comes to romance, feelings and impressions are extremely dangerous. Yet at no other time is a living relationship with God more vital to success. God's interest in human romance is clearly illustrated in the biblical stories about Isaac, Jacob, and Moses.

The second area where God's leadings are absolutely vital is the area of life work. The value of our lifelong service to God is enhanced when we discover His unique plan for us, and how He designed us to succeed in carrying out His plan. I am grateful to God for his personal guidance in this area of my life as well.

After Pam and I got married, we went to the Seminary. Then I entered full-time into ministry. God blessed, and it seemed that a lifelong career in ministry was in view. But after a while a number of little things suggested that I had not yet reached the place of ultimate service. People would say things like, "You're a good pastor, but have you ever considered teaching?" Or, "Your preaching is OK, but when you get a blackboard behind you and start a discussion going, that's when you really get on fire!" I found myself more excited in my personal study and in Sabbath School class than I was in the pulpit or in visitation.

Then I heard about the biblical concept of spiritual gifts. I learned all I could about it and

took a test. The test suggested three areas of major giftedness in my life; teaching, research, and missionary (ability to relate to other cultures). As I pondered the possibilities, it seemed that the one place above all where I could exercise these gifts would be at the Seminary in Berrien Springs, Michigan. There I would be able to teach and have time for research, and I would be dealing with people from all over the world. If that wouldn't work out, another possibility would be to teach Bible in a college overseas.

One thing seemed clear, if God wanted me in higher education, I would need a doctorate. Since no one was offering to pay my way, Pam and I prayerfully decided to begin living sacrificially and saving all we could while continuing in ministry. When we had saved enough for a couple of years of study, we would move to Michigan and she could earn the rest working as a secretary. But one thing we had always been committed to. When children would come along, she would be giving them her full-time attention. So we decided to postpone having children until after the doctorate was complete, or at least sufficient funds were available to take care of the educational costs.

When we reached our financial goals we laid plans to move to Michigan. We informed the conference and our church that we would be leaving. We allowed the landlord to rent our house to other people. Pam found a good secretarial job at Andrews University, where I would be studying. We completed applications and entrance tests. Then, about a month before our move, came the big shock. Pam was pregnant. That meant that she would no longer be working after the baby's arrival. It also meant that most of her potential earnings would not be coming in. It meant that everything we had worked for was now in question.

I suggested to the conference that we could stay in our church for an extra couple of years

so as to save more money for school. The conference and the church both welcomed the idea. But there was another problem. My landlord had already agreed to rent our house to someone else. But when I told him that we wanted to stay he was ecstatic (we were good friends). He said, "If that's the case, I will make it happen. I'm a lawyer. I have nothing down in writing with these people anyway. I'll just tell them they have to find another place." With that encouragement I told the Lord that if we could stay in the same house and in the same church, it would be a sign for us to postpone the doctorate to another time.

When I saw Mike, my landlord, in his backyard the next day, his head was down and his hands were in his pockets. I went over to the low, chain-link fence that separated our yards. He told me that he loved us and wanted us to stay, but that he just couldn't break his agreement with the other people.

"Jon, I gave them my word," he said. "I just don't feel right about going back on my word."

I thought that if this secular lawyer was going to stand by his word and lose his good friend in the process, God must be behind it in some way.

I said, "Mike, you are the voice of God to me today." I could see he didn't know quite what to make of that, but he knew I thought it was a good thing. I told him that he was doing the right thing, and that I would try to do the same with my life. I knew that if God was leading, everything would work out, even if we didn't know where the money was going to come from. So Pam and I prepared to leave town.

Two days later, another friend of mine, who was president of a corporation, came up to me and said, "You have some research skills that I could use. Would you be interested, while

taking your doctorate, in being retained as a consultant for my corporation? I would send you a check of \$300 every month and you could do some research for me from time to time, to help me in my business.” My research interests and his expectations coincided, and the money he offered covered about half of what my wife would have been able to earn back then! The Lord was giving us a token: He would take care of things if we would only trust in Him. As a result, we went on to Michigan in faith, but with some evidence to support our faith.

Once God moved into action, one miracle chased another. During the first couple of years of my doctoral program, interest rates were the highest of that century. That meant that for more than two years the interest on our savings, combined with the retainer, provided as much income as my wife would have earned had she been working. Then shortly after my arrival at the Seminary, a General Conference Committee picked me, of all people, to do a major research project for which they were willing to pay a thousand dollars. A year after I arrived, the chairman of the New Testament Department told me that a professor who was on leave would be delayed for a quarter. Would I mind teaching the classes he would have taught? For a fee of course! For whatever reason that professor kept delaying his return quarter after quarter. For two full years I was able to teach while studying nearly full time as well. The wages for contract teaching were small, but they looked big to me! And the experience was even more valuable than the money.

One day the Dean called me into his office. He said, “We appreciate what you are doing here a great deal. I’ve been going over your records and I see that you have never received financial aid from us. Why haven’t you asked?”

“I don’t think I am eligible,” I said. “You see, my wife and I like to know where our next

meal is coming from, so we have chosen to do whatever it takes to keep up our cash position.

Even though it would be nice to get financial aid, we are not in immediate need.”

“We have to do something for you,” he said, “Let me see. . .” He picked up a thin book and began to leaf through it. “There must be a scholarship somewhere that is based on merit rather than on need.”

That’s the way God works when you are in the right place at the right time. I hadn’t asked for help, yet the Dean called me in. I didn’t think I qualified, yet he decided to find a way to make it happen. Over the next year he provided nearly \$4000 in merit scholarships! And that was only the beginning. The house we are living in also came to us in circumstances that are little short of a miracle, in timing, in cost, and in location. It couldn’t have turned out better if we had planned it that way. A year later, when our money was about to run out, I was offered a permanent job at the Seminary. When I graduated we did not owe anybody anything.

Nothing equals the feeling of knowing that we are where God wants us to be and doing what God wants us to do! And isn’t that the kind of experience God wants for all who follow Him? I know that there are times when God doesn’t choose to protect or to guide. There are times when God in His own purposes may not warn us of danger in advance. But when we see the love that sent Jesus to the cross, we know that we can trust Him no matter what the circumstances. There is no voice of guidance that can compare with His voice, whether in Scripture, the Spirit of Prophecy, impressions, or circumstances. This much I know. Whenever God is ready to speak to me, I want to be like Samuel and say, “Speak, Lord, your servant is listening.”