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T H E P O W E R O F A
WHISPER

HEARING GOD. HAVING THE GUTS TO RESPOND.

BILL HYBELS

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The Power of a Whisper

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To Dick and Betsy DeVos
and
Ron and Sharon VanderPol



Only on the other side will the four of you know
how much your friendship and support
have meant to the Hybels family
and to the global Willow family.

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My son, Todd, has been a living example of a young man who takes whispers seriously.

And what can I say about the congregation of Willow Creek Community Church? They have heard me talk about whispers and promptings for more than thirty-five years. More importantly, they have had the guts to obey the leadings of the Holy Spirit, even when the price got high.

To you, my colleagues, family and faith community, I offer my deepest gratitude.

FOREWORD BY WAYNE CORDEIRO

IN THE 1970S, BEFORE DIGITAL GUITAR TUNERS WERE ON THE market, I was a budding musician (who, after a few decades, is still waiting to bloom), preparing for a song-set at a youth convention. Tuning your guitar in those days required matching tones on one string with another. It's not a difficult task, but another band slated to perform on the same program was really rocking their sound check. My meager Martin was no match for the muscular Marshall amps of these adrenaline-fueled screamers. I had to bend my ear increasingly closer to the sound hole with the loudest plucks I could manage, and yet the blare of the competing system still overpowered my best attempts. Until, that is, I resorted to laying my ear flat on the spruce top of my instrument. Then, no matter how blatantly the rockers attacked, the tender strains of my acoustic guitar could be heard—readily, effectively, sweetly.

It's a lot like that with God. When it comes to being heard by his children, our Father does not compete, nor does he contend for our undivided attention. Often he delivers nothing more than a nudge—easy to dismiss if you don't recognize the Source.

He *whispers*, soft undertones that invite us to bend an ear—or an entire life—until it is pressed flat against his lips.

THE EARLIEST RECOLLECTION I HAVE OF HEARING FROM GOD occurred when I was in the seventh grade, a young Catholic boy living with my family in Japan. Back then I knew my catechism, but I didn't know the person of Christ. I knew that God was "out there," but I had not yet learned the sound of his voice.

It was around that time that I went with a missionary couple who were family friends to visit an adjacent city for a few days. As I watched them work with a group of helpless and hopeless orphans, I sensed a divine message from above: "This is what you will be doing, Wayne. You will be helping people the rest of your life."

Still today, I can remember sitting in that little orphanage, listening to the conversations, observing the mutual love, enjoying the thrill that comes from meeting another person's deepest need, knowing that from that moment on, my life would drastically change. And over time, as I surrendered myself to Christ, I would learn that it was God's voice I had heard that day.

There is a frequency that your life was designed to be tuned to, and that frequency is the unique voice of God. Once you learn to hear it—and you actually *can* get better at picking it out—you will find that your craving for it intensifies as your soul strains to hear more from him. I experienced it first as a twelve-year-old and have known it consistently since: the ability to absorb heaven-sent input fills the sails of your life like nothing or no one else can.

RECENTLY, MY JOURNEY TOOK ME HEADLONG INTO A DEEP pit of burnout. I could no longer hear God's voice and believed

earnestly that my heart for ministry had collapsed. My future was foggy, faded and dim. But during that season of near silence I learned firsthand the power of a whisper. I learned to perceive the sound of stillness, and in the midst of that stillness I finally heard God speak. “Train leaders,” he seemed to prompt.

Train leaders? Was God serious?

I was experiencing the most intense emotional pain I’d ever known, and God’s solution to my overtaxed state was to give me yet another task to accomplish?

What God knew that I couldn’t have known at the time was that his beautiful words of wisdom weren’t intended to give me comfort. They were meant to infuse me with *confidence*, something I sorely needed right then. God wasn’t airlifting me out of my situation; rather than a way out of my pit, he was offering me a way *through*. He knew that in my heart of hearts I didn’t want to abandon my calling, my family, my life. What I really wanted was to be assured that I still had a kingdom contribution to make. A life of leisure might have appealed to my flesh, but what I was truly and desperately in need of was something that would fuel my soul.

Isaiah 30:21 says, “Whether you turn to the right or to the left, your ears will hear a voice behind you, saying, ‘This is the way; walk in it.’” I found that during those difficult days, I would hear God one step at a time. I would start each day soaking up a passage from his Word in order to position myself to hear from him again. And once I’d receive a bit of instruction, I would charge off into my day. But at the first slippery slope or craggy precipice I encountered, I’d realize I needed another infusion of help. “I’m at the far edge of the light,” I’d admit to God. And each time, he’d expand the area of illumination so that I could take another small step.

Today, out of sheer obedience to that divine whisper I heard

in the pit, I divide my time between my home church in Hawaii and a Bible college in Oregon, where I help shape young men and women into the shepherds of tomorrow. But despite the evident successes that have come by heeding God's request of me to train leaders, I think the real thing he was after was my life pressed flat against his lips.

It's probably true for you too. You may have picked up this book because you long for circumstantial input from God: What are his intentions for your future? Will the job you want *ever* pan out? What's he going to do about your exasperating spouse? Won't life just once cut you a break? But I believe the real reason you hold these pages in hand is to learn how to lean more on God.

The Power of a Whisper is the tractor-beam of the soul that prophets of old heard daily. And in the modern-day cacophony of cell phones, email and instant messaging, what will distinguish God's people from others will be hearing and heeding whispers from above. I hope you'll work through this slowly and thoughtfully. Afford yourself a renewed ability to distinguish the tender timbre of your loving Father's voice. Tune yourself to the only frequency that truly can satisfy your soul. And start today boldly responding as you hear the gentle whispers of God.

INTRODUCTION

A FIFTY-YEAR WHISPER-FUELED ODYSSEY

IMAGINE MY SURPRISE WHEN AFTER A WEEKEND SERVICE AT our church I looked into a pair of eyes I had not seen in nearly fifty years. “Do you remember me?” the lanky businessman—about my age—asked, tears pooling in the bottom of his lids. Truthfully, I did not.

He offered a few clues, and it all came flooding back. I remembered not only his name but the names of six other boys who had shared a cabin with us at the summer camp of our youth.

We caught up for a few moments, trying to cram five decades of updates into a terribly brief span of time. Then, as he took in the spacious auditorium surrounding him, he looked me square in the face and asked, “How did all of this happen?”

I began to describe how we had started Willow Creek Community Church in the mid-1970s in a rented movie theater, and how, many years later, we’d purchased property and broken ground on permanent facilities.

“No,” my former cabin mate interrupted, “I didn’t mean how did this *building* happen. I meant how did your *life* turn out the way it did?”

He went on to say that I probably wouldn't enjoy hearing how some of the lives of the rest of those guys from camp wound up—and that he surely wasn't going to bore me with the details of his own life's saga. "But frankly," he said, "I never would have guessed that your story would have unfolded like this." He eyed the line of people still waiting to greet me and then suggested we catch up over dinner sometime. We exchanged a warm handshake, and he was gone.

Later that night in bed, I pondered how I would help my childhood camp mate understand the truth about the unlikely course my life has taken. How could I tell this savvy, cynical business guy that my fifty-year odyssey unfolded as it has because of a series of whispers from God? *Inaudible* whispers, at that. I imagined the mere use of such language would shorten our upcoming dinner considerably, but no other explanation exists. My entire journey comes down to a series of unplanned promptings from heaven that have charted a course for my life even I never could have foreseen.



I have chosen to wait thirty-five years before writing a book about how God's whispers have affected my life—hesitant in part because of the controversy this subject tends to arouse. Even today, when I make public reference to the whispers of God, I barely make it off the stage before half a dozen people approach to remind me that ax murderers often defend their homicides by claiming, "God told me to do it." Conservative Christians question my orthodoxy when I describe my experiences with the promptings of the Holy Spirit, and secularists either are humored or quietly tell their spouses that Hybels has lost his marbles. Or both.

Still, I've come to believe that hearing the quiet whisper of

the transcendent God is one of the most extraordinary privileges in all of life—and potentially the most transforming dynamic in the Christian faith. When people hear from heaven, they are rarely the same again. When the sovereign God chooses to communicate with someone—whether eight, eighteen or eighty years old—that person’s world is rocked. Without a hint of exaggeration, I can boldly declare that God’s low-volume whispers have saved me from a life of sure boredom and self-destruction. They have redirected my path, rescued me from temptation and reenergized me during some of my deepest moments of despair. They inspire me to live my life at what boaters call “wide-open throttle”—full on!

So, why go to the trouble of penning the words in the chapters that follow? Because I firmly believe that God whispers to you too. If you lower the ambient noise of your life and listen expectantly for those whispers of God, your ears will hear them. And when you follow their lead, your world will be rocked. Let’s get started.

BILL HYBELS
South Haven, Michigan
August 2009

SAMUEL'S EAR

I GREW UP IN A CHRISTIAN FAMILY AND AS A KID WENT TO A Christian school, which admittedly had its advantages and its disadvantages. As an adult who now appreciates having received a sturdy spiritual foundation, I have greater appreciation for one of the clear plusses: Each day before recess, my classmates and I would have to sit and listen to our teacher read a short story from the Bible. The better we listened, the faster she read—and the faster she read the sooner we'd be out on the baseball fields. With that as my motivation, I was all ears every day.

One such day, when I was in the second grade of that school in Kalamazoo, Michigan, my teacher read a story from the Old Testament about a man named Eli—an older worker in the temple—and a young boy named Samuel, whom he mentored. As the story goes, one night after Samuel had gone to bed, he thought he heard Eli calling for him. He got out of bed, ran to where Eli was lying down and said, "I heard you call. Here I am."¹

Eli looked at young Samuel, confusion creasing the old man's forehead. "I didn't call you," Eli said. "Go back to bed."²

Samuel, of course, complied. But moments later, he heard his

name again. “Samuel!” the voice called. Samuel rose from his bed, hurried to Eli’s side and said, “Here I am; you called me.”

Again Eli told the boy he was wrong. Again Samuel returned to his bed.

When it happened a third time, the old man finally realized what was going on. “Samuel, maybe God is trying to get a message to you,” Eli explained. “Go back and lie down. If the voice calls again, say, ‘Speak, God. I am your servant, ready to listen.’”³

And so, the text says, “Samuel returned to his bed,”⁴ where soon thereafter he heard his name yet again. “Samuel! Samuel!” the Lord called, to which Samuel replied on cue, “Speak, for your servant is listening.”⁵

The message that the Lord then spoke to young Samuel was a prophetic promise that would radically impact an entire nation. But the content of that message is not what struck me as I sat in my wooden grade-school desk. What struck me was the fact that the content got conveyed through the ears and lips of a little boy!

The recess bell rang. Miss Van Solen stood, and my classmates made a rush for the room’s single door. Typically I was the first kid on the field, picking teams and filling positions and generally organizing the sport of the day. But not today. Today I found myself glued to my seat. The story she’d read had leveled me for reasons I didn’t fully understand.

When the room had emptied save for Miss Van Solen and me, I eased out of my desk, stuffed my hands deep in my pockets and walked up to my teacher.

“What is it, Billy?” she asked—probably fearing the worst, given that it was recess and I was still indoors.

“Miss Van Solen,” I said as my throat began to choke up, “does God *still* speak to little boys?”

She smiled and let out a relieved sigh. Placing her two hands on my small shoulders, she looked me square in the eye.

“Oh, *yes*, Billy,” she said. “He most certainly does. And if you learn to quiet yourself and listen, he even will speak to you. I am *sure* of it.”

I felt a swell of release as I considered for the first time in my seven years of life that perhaps Christianity was more than ancient rules, creeds and other stiff-necked ways. Maybe God really *did* speak. And maybe he'd speak to me.

Satisfied by her answer, I turned to head out to the baseball fields. “Billy,” Miss Van Solen called after me, “I have something for you.” She reached into the top drawer of her desk. “For some reason I've kept this poem here, but I think you should have it now. It might help you, given what we talked about today.” She slipped a folded piece of paper into my palm, and with her knowing nod I was dismissed.

AS I PULLED ON MY PAJAMAS THAT NIGHT, MY MIND KEPT drifting back to the idea that maybe God would someday speak to me. I rummaged through the pockets of my school pants and pulled out the paper Miss Van Solen had given me. Opening its folds and flattening out its creases, I discovered a poem—words about having Samuel's ears to hear God, every single day. I read the poem and then read it again. I read it a third time, and then figured I might as well memorize the thing. And so I did.

The next day just before recess, Miss Van Solen read a Bible story that meant absolutely nothing to me. I faked attentiveness, knowing this would help my baseball game come sooner, and when the beloved bell finally sounded its alarm, I flew out of my desk and lunged for the classroom door.

“Not so fast, Billy,” Miss Van Solen's singsong voice rang out. I felt my shirt collar caught in her grip. As my friends pushed past either side of me and headed out to recess, Miss Van Solen asked, “What did you think of the poem I gave you?”

“I really liked it,” I said.

“You mean you actually read it?” she asked.

“I memorized it,” I said with a straight face and a shrug.

“No *way*,” she said, flabbergasted.

“Yes, way, I did,” I countered.

She called my bluff. “Can you say it for me?”

I took up the dare.

“Oh, give me Samuel’s ear,” I said, “an open ear, O Lord, alive and quick to hear each whisper of Thy Word; like him to answer to Thy call, and to obey Thee first of all.”

As I finished my recitation, I thought Miss Van Solen might faint dead away, right then and there. As a pride-infused smile beamed across her face, again I felt those two hands on my small frame: “You keep listening for God to speak, Billy,” she said, “and I believe he will use your life in a very special way.”



After that experience, I tried to listen for the whispers of God. I didn’t do it well enough or often enough, but as I walked down the road of my young life and faced the right-or-wrong choices that all adolescent boys face, sometimes I’d recall that rhyming refrain.

*Oh! give me Samuel’s ear,
An open ear, O Lord,
Alive and quick to hear
Each whisper of Thy Word;
Like him to answer to Thy call
And to obey Thee first of all.*⁶

Each time the plea for Samuel’s ear floated through my mind, it was as if I could hear God cheering me on—at least as much as I understood “God” at the time. I’d be standing at the cross-

roads of the paths marked yes and no and would sense him say, "I'm rooting for you, Billy! Take the high road here; you'll never regret your yes." It shouldn't have surprised me that God's way would prove best. But each time I'd head off on the high road and feel the good feelings that his way always brings, I'd look heavenward and with a shake of my head think, "God, you were right again!"

As I grew into the teenaged version of myself, an insatiable craving for adventure grew inside me too. My dad had discerned a thrill-seeking temperament in me from an early age, and he knew that if he didn't do something to channel all that energy in a positive direction, I'd likely wind up wrecking my life. Before I was even ten, he sent me off all alone on a cross-country train bound for Aspen, Colorado. Evidently he wanted me to learn how to ski, which would have been fine had he actually been present on that trip to teach me. The real goal, I would later surmise, was learning how to navigate the big, blue world around me. And navigate it I would.

When I was sixteen, my admittedly eccentric father came home from work one day and announced, "Billy, I think you ought to see even *more* of the world." It was the middle of the school year, a reality I felt sure my incredulous expression conveyed. Reading my expression, he added with a grin, "Obviously, you must never allow school to interfere with your education."

Clearly we wouldn't want that.

The following week, I boarded a plane headed for Europe. For eight weeks straight—again, all by myself—I traipsed from Scandinavia to the Middle East, and then headed for Nairobi, Kenya.

Having no idea what else to do when I arrived in Nairobi, I decided to take a walk. It was a decision that—five minutes in—I deeply and desperately regretted. I began down a bustling dirt

road, and as I rounded the first corner, I came face-to-face with a level of human suffering I hadn't known could exist. I peered down the street and took in scores upon scores of people leaning against broken-down, battered buildings. The effects of rampant disease and malnutrition were obvious; I breathed in the open-guttered stench; I felt the staleness, the thickness of the air, and I knew I'd never again be the same.

As I made my way around a row of gaunt, downcast faces, my stomach started to lurch. "I'm a Dutch kid from Kalamazoo, Michigan," I thought. "What am I doing *here*?"

Turning the next corner, I saw a boy about my age. The leprosy that racked this part of the city had found its way to this young kid. The bottom half of his arm was missing, and on the nub of his upper arm he'd rested a tiny tin cup. I took in his situation, trying not to be too obvious about it. Our eyes met, and he uttered a single word.

"Penny?"

I thrust my hands in my pockets but discovered I had nothing for a situation like this. My fingers found the stiff, rounded corners of my dad's American Express card—useless to this kid—and then a wadded up stack of traveler's checks that were tucked around a folded airline ticket for wherever I was headed next.

"Sorry," I mumbled, showing him my empty hands. Embarrassed, I hurriedly stepped away.

When I was safely out of the young man's sight, I ran as fast as my legs could carry me back to my hotel. Rushing inside my room, I emptied my pockets, fell to my knees and buried my head in the rug. I began to pray, although I had little relationship with the One I was praying to—and no idea what to say. All I knew was that I had never before seen suffering like I'd seen on the streets that day, and the only person I figured would know what to do about it was the God I'd heard hates suffering too.

As I sat crouched there, tears streaming down my hot cheeks, I heard an inaudible whisper from God: “If you will allow me to guide your life, one day I will use you to relieve some of the pain you see.”

I quickly sealed the pact. “That would be great,” I said to the silence all around. “That would be *absolutely* fine with me.”



The following summer, I surrendered my life to Christ. I had been going to a Christian camp in Wisconsin since I was in single digits, but it wasn't until I stood on its familiar hillside at age seventeen that I finally connected with God for real. In the perfect stillness of a late-night hour, the words of Titus 3:5—a verse that I'd been told to memorize as a boy in Sunday school—crept back into my consciousness. “Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost.”⁷ In a flash of divine insight, I heard God's still, small voice: “You will never earn your way to my approval, Bill, but it is yours without condition right now.” His whisper reflected a depth and purity of love that was so rich and real, I wondered if I was making the whole experience up.

I rushed back to my cabin, awakened my friends and dragged them all out of bed. “I don't have language to describe what just happened in my heart,” I panted, “but I took a step of faith and invited God into my life—for real. For good. He came in, and I feel different on the inside!”

My groggy cabin mates glared at me with eyes that said this was a no-good reason to interrupt their sleep, but I knew the truth in my heart. I hadn't made up that hilltop experience. The decision I'd made that night was undeniable, irreversible and *good*. I've never looked back.

SHORTLY AFTER MY LATE-NIGHT GRACE-ATTACK, I BEGAN TO wrestle with how seriously I was going to take my newfound faith. I grasped that Jesus had died for me on a cross, forgiven my sins and promised me a place in heaven. I even gathered that it would be a good thing to invest a few minutes a day reading my Bible, saying some prayers and perhaps getting involved with a church. But in the midst of all my low-balling, I kept hearing about people my age who were going all-out for God. Fully committed and truly devoted, they were allowing their faith to affect things like their morals, their relationships, their money management and in some cases even their *career path*, which seemed a little over-the-top to me.

God had whispered into my boyhood years, helping me learn to act on what is right. He had whispered again to me in a slum in Kenya, encouraging me to pay attention to suffering wherever I see it. He had whispered to me in Wisconsin, asking me to give him the whole of my life. On and on these whispers continued, and thankfully as God was speaking more regularly, I grew increasingly aware of my need for input from above.

I *wanted* to live wide open to God, but I couldn't reconcile my sin. The truth about me is that for as long as I can remember, I have possessed an awe-inspiring, southbound gravitational pull that makes me rationalize doing something that is wrong as though somehow it were right. I am prone to justify my behavior when I cross lines that clearly I should not cross. I want to stay put when God asks me to move, to go right when God suggests a left-hand turn, and to speak my mind when I sense silence would serve me better.

He prodded me toward being a young man of my word, toward releasing judgment and revenge-seeking. "Love your enemies," he'd whisper, just when things were heating up. "Never return evil for evil, but return evil with good."

"*Seriously*, God?" I wondered.

I worried that devoting myself more fully to God would only make battles such as these more intense. I had wanted to hear directly from heaven since the second grade, but now that such input was frequent—and often contrary to my reflexive reaction to things—I was second-guessing my childhood request.

About that time, an older Christian man approached me and offered to buy me dinner. As a teenage boy and a frugal Dutchman, I regarded his offer of a free meal as a no-brainer.

Five bites into my burger the man said, "So, Bill, all the signs seem to be pointing to you heading into your family's business. And while that's a fine choice to make, I have a question for you. What are you going to do with your life that will last *forever*?"

"I have no doubts about your making money and racking up a ton of achievements," the man continued. "You're a bright kid who will probably set records in whatever you choose to do. I'm just curious what you'll do that will *outlive* you and all of those earthly accomplishments."

I made eye contact with the guy with each bite of burger, careful to chew thoroughly so that I wouldn't have to speak. How was I supposed to respond to an assessment like *that*? I was just a teenager, and teenage boys by definition are only concerned with three things: food, thrills and girls. And in my case, God too, but *how much* of God was still up for debate.

Undaunted, the man continued. "What are you going to do to serve people—because people are the only commodity that makes it to the next life, you know..."

Sensing the questions wouldn't stop until I offered some semblance of a response, I put together a few words to get this guy off my back. But the effects of that supposedly free dinner held me captive the rest of the night.

As I crawled into bed a few hours later, I had a strong sense

of God's presence. It was as if he walked right into my room, sat on the edge of my mattress and in the sightless shadows of the night repeated the older man's words. "What are you going to do with your one and only life?" I sensed him whisper. "What difference will you make for eternity? Faster cars, more cash and toys—none of those will make it beyond your grave."

As I stared at the ceiling, I felt my thrill-seeking days slip through my fingers like sand. I was being asked to make a choice: Would I choose a future I could generate and control myself—or would I sign on for the vagaries of a God-guided life? I was not even sure what a "God-guided life" would look like, but I was fairly sure the fun factor would be dialed back further than my liking.

I then recalled my dinner companion's closing words: "Bill, I'm going to issue you a challenge," he had said just before we left. "Why not put your *whole life* in God's hands? Why not trust him fully? I challenge you to give him full clearance to lead your life—*every* area of your life—until the point that he proves himself to be untrustworthy. At that moment, you can bail. But until then, give God total control. I challenge you to push the throttle as far as you can push it, and live your life wide open to God. See where his way takes you. I have a feeling you'll never regret it."

In the quiet of my room, the man's words kept replaying in my mind, gaining energy every time. There *was* something a little intriguing about seeing what God might do with my life. Where would he direct me to go? Who would he direct me to become? I could bail as soon as he muffed his part of the deal, right?

As I lay there, I redirected the man's challenge to me back to something of a challenge to God: "You want to lead my life fully, God? Alright, then. Let's see what you can do."



After those sometimes-tumultuous high school days—during the time when I was still working for my family’s fresh-produce business—my dad presented me with another stack of airline tickets.

“Billy,” he announced, “it’s time to enlarge your world a little further.” This time he was sending me to Latin America. Was I really so stubborn that God has to take me to the farthest reaches of the earth to get my attention? Regardless, with the American Express card in my pocket and a slightly more open mind this time around, I boarded a plane for Brazil.

When I arrived in Rio de Janeiro, I learned that I’d be staying overnight at a hotel overlooking Copacabana Beach, which in those days was the jet-set capital of the world. After walking the beach and taking in the local scene, I went to the restaurant at the top of my hotel, sat down at a table overlooking the water and ordered dinner.

A retired couple from the United States was seated at a table a few feet from me, speaking to one another in a volume I couldn’t ignore. At one point in their conversation, the husband looked at his wife with a self-satisfied gaze and said, “Honey, being here tonight, at *this* hotel on *this* beach, makes all of life’s efforts worthwhile. I mean, *look* at this! *Copacabana* Beach! The long hours at work, the overtime, the business travel. . . . It was all worth it to be able to be right here, right now.”

His words hit me like a sledgehammer. I was *nineteen years old* and was already “here.” The thought of spending the next fifty years enduring a passion-killing job only to come back to this same hotel overlooking this same beach and have dinner at this very same table seemed insane to me. My disillusionment rose as I silently fumed. “This is not enough of a payoff

for five decades of life lived,” I thought. “This can’t be enough for people!”

Hearing my thoughts, God responded with a whisper. “Bill, almost everyone you know is living for additional income, and yet you have not even spent the last two bonus checks that are still tucked inside your wallet. How many checks will you need to pile up before you get it? If money fired you up, you would have used your last two bullets by now. Paychecks are *never* going to energize you, Bill. That is not who I wired you to be.”

I was so rattled by this experience that I left my uneaten steak on the table and headed for my hotel room a few floors down. My mind replayed one question over and over again: “If paychecks will never scratch the itch, God, then what’s going to do it for me?”

Inside my room, I sat with my palms upturned on my lap. With the most sincere words I knew how to say, I prayed, “God, guide my life toward a purpose that really will count. I am wide open to how you would choose to lead my life!”

I heard no audible response. Nothing. Instead, an odd feeling swept over me—the kind of feeling that race car drivers must feel when they’re barreling into a turn at high speed and they start to lose control of their cars—a feeling of pure adrenaline mixed with terror.

Within months of that monumental evening, I would walk away from my family’s business, leave the comfortable life I had known in Kalamazoo and move to Chicago where I would help a friend lead the youth ministry that eventually gave birth to Willow Creek Community Church. I was finally beginning to grasp that whispers matter. They matter a *lot*.

And decades later, I still shake my head in wonder at the power of a single whisper I received after not eating a meal while overlooking Brazil’s most famous beach.

THREE YEARS INTO THAT YOUTH-GROUP LEADERSHIP, ATTENDANCE had exploded from an original collection of twenty-five to more than a thousand kids. As is always the case in ministry, there were challenges, but what I recall from this era is *life* and *peace*. I was watching the promise of Romans 8:6 play out powerfully in my young, twenty-something world. “The mind controlled by the sinful nature is death,” the verse says, “but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace.” The youth group was growing, people were coming to Christ, I had a beautiful wife, we were expecting our first child—life was firing on all pistons.

Whenever I had fought God’s guidance in my life, I’d experienced feelings of anxiety and “death.” But here? Now? In the midst of teaching kids I loved? I was right where I was supposed to be for the rest of my life. Or so I thought. But uneasy feelings began. I was sensing God’s guidance in a new direction.

Imagine the conversation I had with my young, pregnant wife when I suggested that we put our recently acquired house up for sale because I was hearing whispers from God about starting a church from scratch in a distant suburb. Suffice it to say, it was a long night!

Enter Willow Creek Theater.



Holding church in a movie theater might sound like a fun gig to you, but when that movie theater regularly shows scary movies on Saturday night and assumes that—since you’re coming in on Sunday morning anyway—you might as well be the ones to clean up the fright-induced pools of vomit that wind up coating the floor, it loses a bit of its luster.

What’s more, those of us who had been called to start Willow were flat-broke teenagers and early twenty-somethings who

knew nothing of starting a church. In this case “life” and “peace” would come by way of selling tomatoes door-to-door to fund a meager sound system, and cashing in on every penny of credit we could get, just to keep the lights on.

But to no one’s surprise, God proved faithful each and every step of the way, despite rookie leadership errors on my part that several times threatened to utterly do us in.

Eventually, after countless decisions for Christ, recommitments, baptisms, heartfelt prayers, growth opportunities seized and acts of service given, God would bless Willow Creek with a permanent property to call home. And over time, that little band of tomato sellers—who had been so committed to hearing and heeding God’s promptings—would be handed an opportunity to influence people on a scale no one ever could have imagined.

Somewhere in the late 1980s, I noticed a trend in the kind of phone calls coming my way at church. Pastors from Dallas to Orlando, LA to Seattle began hearing about what God was doing at Willow Creek, and they called to ask for help. “Would you train us?” was the most common refrain. “Would you show us how you ‘do’ church like you do?”

These phone calls came with increasing consistency, but I was busy leading Willow at the time and didn’t feel I had much to say that could help these other pastors. Willow’s leaders and I were so focused on trying to accomplish the mission we had been given by God that I never stopped to assess *how* we were doing what we were doing. We were quite content to keep forging ahead in South Barrington and let others sort out their own stuff.

But along the way, one pastor made an offer I couldn’t refuse. I was sitting in my office when his call came through, and after a few seconds of pleasantries, this pastor made his pitch.

“I am so determined to glean from the leadership lessons your team has learned,” he implored, “that I’ll fly to Chicago at

my own expense on any day of your choosing if it means that such a meeting could occur.”

I rattled off reasons why his plan wouldn't work: I was too busy. I didn't have anything substantive to share. My focus was set on South Barrington.

It was a lame litany of excuses.

“Surely I am not the first pastor who has called. . . .” he said.

“Well, no,” I admitted.

“Then why don't you compile a list of the next dozen or so pastors who call you,” he suggested, “and invest just one day in training us all at the same time? I'd be happy to coordinate the event. We could rent a conference room at a local hotel so that you wouldn't have to use up one of Willow's rooms to get this done. All you would have to do is show up and answer questions all day long. I'll handle the rest!”

This guy was determined. There was no way I could say no.

“If you're willing to do all that legwork,” I conceded, “I will be happy to show up. Send me a few date options, and let's go.”

Several weeks later, I stepped into the hotel conference room and found twenty-five serious-minded pastors who were committed to getting better in their leadership roles. The engagement level was high, the questions were intelligent and the interaction around the table was catalytic to each of us. By the time I looked down at my watch, it was four o'clock in the afternoon. The day had flown by.

I had a commitment at the church that night, and as I pulled away from the hotel and made my way back up Algonquin Road, I sensed a two-word prompting from God that was as clear as any I have ever received: “Serve pastors,” he said. That was it. “Serve pastors.”

As I absorbed that whisper, I said to God, “If what you mean by that is doing what I just did today, I'm in! I now see the value of

investing in other leaders this way, and if this is how you would have me spend a portion of my time and energy, I'll do it." I realized that living out this whisper might very well complicate my life and ministry, but I couldn't deny the clarity of God's input, nor could I refute the power of what had unfolded before me in the conference room that day. God's bidding was clear, and I was determined to see where it would lead.

In the coming years, the Willow Creek Association would be birthed from this desire to usher in help for as many local church pastors as possible, so that *every* congregation could prevail. And as the number of those banded-together churches crested one thousand, five thousand, ten thousand and more, I would catch myself thinking, "I love that God willingly speaks to us, that he cares enough for us as his kids to whisper the path that he'd have us walk."

"Spiritually alive" and "filled to the brim with peace"—these are the two descriptors that mark this season of life for me. But as is often the case when walking closely with Christ, the tides of our world can shift quickly, and in some pretty significant ways.

WITHIN SEVERAL YEARS, I NOTICED A NEW TREND IN THE PHONE calls we were receiving. The calls that once came in from Dallas, Orlando, LA and Seattle now originated in London, Frankfurt, Sydney and Singapore. Our international foray had begun.

I began making trips to various global locations where committed pastors were hungry to grow in their leadership skills. One year, during an especially rigorous trip through Western Europe, I arrived in Lucerne, Switzerland, where I was to speak to four hundred pastors at a regional leadership conference. Fighting exhaustion, I seriously questioned if I should be saying yes to so many of these international requests.

After nearly six hours of teaching, my session was followed by a worship leader who took the stage. From my seat in the front row of the centuries-old Swiss sanctuary, all I could think about was getting back to my hotel and crashing on the bed. But tonight, that just wasn't meant to be. The worship guy had more than a final song in mind.

"I think we should linger here a few more minutes," he said, strumming his guitar quietly, reverently, with a spirit of worship I clearly did not share.

I eyed him suspiciously, as though his impromptu extension was in direct challenge to my silent cry for sleep. My throat was sore, my back ached, my head was foggy and all I wanted was a mattress. His words again interrupted my thoughts: "I'll keep playing as long as I need to, in order for God to have the chance to speak to those of us who need to hear from him now."

"Nooo!" my mind revolted. "Don't play *that* card." I let my head fall into my hands. I was beside myself with exhaustion. "Just do us all a favor," I thought, "and end this session now."

No luck. This guy was convinced that God was trying to speak to someone. In total exasperation I mumbled quietly, "God, if I'm the guy keeping us from ending this conference, then speak to me and let's get this over with."

And with my hand on a Bible, I would tell you that God unmistakably spoke to me. "For reasons you do not have to understand," he said, "I am calling you to serve church leaders beyond the borders of the United States. I am making no promises that it will be easy. In fact, it will require more sacrifice than anything else I have asked you to do, but I am asking you now . . . serve church leaders wherever I give you opportunity around the world."

There it was, in about fifteen seconds flat—one innocent whisper that would upturn a major part of my life.

As daunting as it all sounded to me that day in the front row of that historic sanctuary, I had walked with God long enough by then to know that even his tough assignments are precious entrustments. And when he calls us into sacrificial roles, it is never without his caring presence or affection. That lone whisper complicated the next twenty years of my life in ways that I never could have imagined: the time away from my family has been tougher than I ever imagined; the toll on Willow is a story in itself; and the emotional and physical price of crossing time zones thousands of times is higher than I ever calculated. Truly, living out the “whisper in Lucerne” has taken me to levels of loneliness and despair that I didn’t know existed. More often than I care to admit, I have asked God to amend or rescind that whisper. Interestingly—and sometimes annoyingly—I get no response to that prayer.

As I write this, I still am recuperating from jet lag from a recent trip to Asia. Did I feel God’s presence and favor? Absolutely! Did I feel obedient to his bidding? Yes. Were there moments of exhilaration? Yes. But would I gladly receive an updated whisper releasing me from all international responsibilities starting today? You better believe I would.

Whispers can be dangerous things. They can come with huge price tags. God’s whisper to his Son, Jesus—to make a redemptive visit to planet Earth—was a costly one, and as we will see in the next chapter, high-cost whispers are a huge part of what has kept the kingdom dream alive throughout the centuries. Therefore it should come as no surprise that a certain number of whispers that come our way will drive us to our knees and stretch our faith like nothing else can. So be it. We only live once, and I much prefer the idea of standing before God one day, having done his bidding to the best of my understanding than to face him knowing full well that I ignored his voice and sidestepped

SAMUEL'S EAR

the tougher promptings I received. What started for me with the reciting of a poem to Miss Van Solen is what I cling to still, to this day:

*Oh! give me Samuel's ear,
An open ear, O Lord,
Alive and quick to hear
Each whisper of Thy Word;
Like him to answer to Thy call
And to obey Thee first of all.*

