

# Has Any People Heard the Voice of God Speaking ... And Survived?

*R. Albert Mohler, Jr.*

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**R. Albert Mohler, Jr.** serves as the ninth president of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and the Joseph Emerson Brown Professor of Christian Theology. Dr. Mohler is the author of numerous books and articles, including *He is Not Silent: Preaching in a Postmodern World* (Moody, 2008), *Words from the Fire: Hearing the Voice of God in the Ten Commandments* (Moody, 2009), *Culture Shift: The Battle for the Moral Heart of America* (Multnomah, 2011). In addition to his presidential duties, Dr. Mohler hosts two programs: “The Briefing,” a daily analysis of news and events from a Christian worldview; and “Thinking in Public,” a series of conversations with the day’s leading thinkers, and he also writes a popular blog and a regular commentary on moral, cultural and theological issues. All of these can be accessed through his website, [www.AlbertMohler.com](http://www.AlbertMohler.com).

One of the great touchstone passages in all Scripture appears in Deuteronomy 4. Verse 33 contains a striking question—a rhetorical question, but a very real question: “Has any people heard the voice of God speaking from the midst of the fire, as you have heard it, and survived?”

Just like the Israelites at Mount Sinai, we are summoned together as God’s people—to speak of God, to sing about God, to worship God. It is no small thing to dare to speak of God. We actually claim that we teach what God has taught.

There ought to be a bit of humility in recognizing the audacity of that claim. It would be a baseless claim—an incredible claim—if God has not spoken from the midst of the fire and allowed us to hear. On what authority do we speak? Is it the authority of the churches of our respective denominations? Such authority is no small thing, but is still

not enough. To dare speak of these things, we invoke the authority of God, for he alone could reveal himself, speak these things, and tell us what we must know.

The great philosophical crisis of our day is an epistemological crisis—a crisis of knowing and a crisis of knowledge. It is a challenge for the Christian thinker, the Christian theologian, the Christian minister, the Christian preacher, and the Christian institution—the whole of Christianity. The crisis can be summed up in one question: How do we know and teach what we claim to know and teach?

Francis Schaeffer well understood the epistemological crisis and accordingly titled his most significant contribution, *He Is There and He Is Not Silent*. I first read this classic as a sixteen-year-old. To be honest, I think the greatest assurance I got from the book at that age was that some really smart person believed in God. But even at that age, lacking the vocabulary to understand what I was experiencing, I understood the epistemological crisis. How do we know anything? How would we speak of anything? Furthermore, how do we jump from the empirical knowledge of what we can observe to speaking of God whom we cannot see?

### **A New Leap in Audacity**

The claim to know anything, certainly in terms of empirical and scientific observation and study and phenomenology, is audacious enough. But then to speak of the “immortal invisible God only wise”—that is a new leap of audacity altogether.

Dr. Schaeffer understood the epistemological problem that is silence—the claim and the implication that we can know nothing. And he understood that there is only one epistemological answer—revelation. Christianity depends upon a Christian epistemology, a Christian theory of knowledge based in revelation alone. There is no greater challenge than this—to make certain we know on what authority we speak, and know, and teach.

In Deuteronomy 4, Moses reminds Israel of the authority by which they were to live. They heard the voice of God speaking from the midst of the fire and survived. This great sermon concludes the introductory section to Deuteronomy, and stands as a unit all to itself. The sermon begins and ends with a parallel structure, and in the midst is itself a large component of a suzerainty treaty. Such a treaty was a common form in the ancient Near Eastern world, giving the conqueror the right to set down the terms of the treaty. In the book of Deuteronomy, the conqueror is none other

than the Lord God Jehovah and the conquered is none other than his own chosen nation Israel. God sets down terms, and they are very easy to understand. It comes down to a very simple formula: hear and obey and live. Refuse to hear, disobey, and bear the wrath of God.

Looking back to the covenant at Horeb, it is clear that obedience led to blessing, disobedience led to God's curse. The generations that survived, kept alive through forty years of wandering in the wilderness, witnessed the death of their own parents who disobeyed and did not trust the Lord.

And now, as the Lord prepares his people for the conquest of the Holy Land, they hear exhortation and memory mixed together. Lest they forget, they are being reminded that they heard the voice of God speaking from the midst of the fire and survived. They share in the memory of God's great saving work in bringing Israel out of captivity to Pharaoh in Egypt, and his keeping the children of Israel alive through forty years of wandering in the wilderness. They were led by smoke and by fire—Moses says, "Remember, and live!"

### **These Ten Words**

Deuteronomy, *deutero nomos*, means the second giving of the law, because Deuteronomy 5 again contains the Ten Commandments, *these Ten Words*. The theme is very clear. Israel, in terms of its elect status, is the chosen nation of God. The Torah serves as a constant reminder of their special status. In these Ten Words, the central truth is that the Lord God spoke to his people, they heard, and they survived. Looking backward to Deuteronomy 4:10–11, Moses says:

Remember the day you stood before the Lord your God at Horeb, when the Lord said to me, "Assemble the people to Me, that I may let them hear My words so they may learn to fear Me all the days they live on the earth, and that they may teach their children." You came near and stood at the foot of the mountain, and the mountain burned with fire to the very heart of the heavens: darkness, cloud and thick gloom.

We must remind ourselves that the giving of the Ten Commandments cannot be separated from the narrative context from which it comes. The propositional truth so clearly there in the law, comes in the midst of a history of a people and God's dealing with the people. *It is a relational revelation*, and it is a dramatic revelation. Israel is reminded not only of what they heard, but of the context in which they heard it:

The mountain burned with fire to the heart of heaven, wrapped in darkness, cloud, and gloom. Then the Lord spoke to you out of the midst of the fire. You heard the sound of words, but you saw no form—only a voice. So He declared to you His covenant which He commanded you to perform, that is, the Ten Commandments, and wrote them on two tablets of stone (Deut 4:11–13).

“The Lord spoke to you out of the midst of the fire,” Moses said. “You heard the sound of words, but saw no form; there was only a voice.”

### **The Silent Idols, The Speaking God**

As will be made clear in the Second Commandment— this is not a God who is seen, but a God who is heard. The contrast with the idols is very clear—the idols are seen, but they do not speak. The one true and living God is not seen, but he is heard. The contrast is intentional, graphic, and clear—we speak because we have heard. And the voice of God is not something Israel deserved, nor do we. It is sheer mercy.

We have no right to hear God speak. We have no call upon his voice. We have no right to demand that he would speak. We are accustomed to pointing to the cross of Christ and glorying in the cross of Christ —as we ought always to do—and saying of the cross, “There is mercy!” But at Mount Horeb, there too was mercy! There is mercy when God speaks. This is the mercy of God allowing us to hear his voice.

I think there is the danger that contemporary evangelicals think of the doctrine of revelation primarily as an epistemological problem. Even those who hold to a high doctrine of Scripture, affirming the inerrancy of Scripture, verbal inspiration, and propositional truth are still in danger of thinking of revelation primarily in epistemological terms. The reality is that revelation is mercy, a gift. As Professor Eugene Merrill has said more specifically, speaking of Deuteronomy 4:33, no people other than Israel has ever heard God speak out of the fire and lived to tell about it. The fact is, as Professor Merrill said, there are not even any other peoples that heard the voice of the Lord speak out of the fire and *did not* live to tell about it.<sup>1</sup> The Lord God spoke uniquely and particularly to Israel, but knowing the speaker and understanding who he is, the miracle is that even those he would allow to hear his voice would survive.

The background, of course, is the paganism of that day. The idols were many, but the idols were silent. The silence of the idols is a pervasive biblical theme. Think of 1 Kings 18, and the battle of the gods. Think of Elijah

as he waits and watches the prophets of Asherah and Baal. Watch as the prophets of Baal jump around the altar and lacerate their bodies so that the blood flows down into the ground, and they leap to get Baal's attention. But, as we are told in 1 Kings 18, there was no voice. No one answered, no one paid attention. Idolatry is contrasted with the religion of Israel on the basis of revelation. The idols do not speak. The Lord God of Israel does. The idols are seen but not heard. God is heard but not seen.

The background of this, of course, is the horrible thought that must be in the background of our thinking and in the foreground of our hearts. What if God had not spoken? What if we ourselves had not received this inheritance through Israel's gift? A part of what it means to be grafted upon the tree, the wild olive branch, is that this too is the word of God to us.

What if God had not spoken? If God had not spoken, the seminary I lead would not exist, at least not along the same lines. If God had not spoken, we might still have a school of religion. Human beings, in the blindness of trying to figure things out, would come to some notion of transcendence and even think up arguments for the existence of a deity. Pondering long enough on an argument from design, we could come to a "watchmaker" thesis, bringing an explanatory matrix to all we see.

Of course, we need not speak hypothetically about this. All we have to do is listen in on the cultural chatter, and we can hear the kind of conversation that would take place if God had indeed not spoken. Just visit some of the more liberal divinity schools, theological seminaries, and universities. There you will hear the kind of philosophical discourse, teaching, and worldview that would emerge *everywhere* if God had not spoken.

Such purveyors of so-called knowledge would lead us to ask: what if this is all really just a game we are playing, each using whatever language game is convenient and handy in terms of our social and cultural and linguistic system? They reason that if all this really is something of a smorgasbord of worldviews, then we can put it all together as best we see fit. If God had not spoken, then there is no end to that game. If God has not spoken, then there is no one who is right, and there is no one who is wrong. If God has not spoken, then all you have is the end game of postmodernism—nihilism without knowledge.

### **If God Has Spoken...**

But if God *has* spoken, everything is changed. If God has spoken, then the highest human aspiration must be to hear what the Creator has said. And though the revelation of God is not merely propositions, it is never

less than that. Revelation is personal. Hearing the voice of the Lord God is not merely to receive information, but to meet the living God. We are accustomed to speaking and singing of the grace and mercy of God, and of our redemption in the cross of Christ. But we must also speak of the mercy of God in revelation.

In the book of Deuteronomy, we meet the speaking God. Again, in verse 33: “Has any people heard the voice of God speaking from the midst of the fire, as you have heard it, and survived?” Mercy and grace meet here—also, as Moses makes clear, this text affirms accountability. This is, in its own way, a *protogospel*, a revelation of the law, a discontinuity or distinction, but a continuity all the same, law and gospel. Christopher Wright, commenting on what took place at Sinai, said that what really mattered there was not that there had been a theophonic manifestation of God, but that there had been a verbal revelation of God’s mind and will. Sinai was a cosmic audiovisual experience, but it was the audio that mattered. It is the audio that matters, for God has spoken.<sup>2</sup>

If God has spoken, let me suggest several realities that should frame our thinking. First, *if God has spoken, we do know*. As a matter of fact, if God has spoken, we *must* know. And what we know, because God has revealed himself to us, is the highest and the greatest knowledge that any human ear can ever hear. And having heard it, we cannot feign ignorance, acting as if we do not know. That is why Francis Schaeffer said that for the Christian who understands the doctrine of revelation, there is no real epistemological crisis. There is only a spiritual crisis. All that remains is whether you will obey.<sup>3</sup> Also, because we know, there is a firm basis to our life and ministry. We have an authority for our preaching and our teaching. We are not making this up as we go along! Because we have heard, we cannot feign ignorance, and we are accountable for the hearing.

Second, *if God has spoken, we know only by mercy*. There is no pride in our knowing, because everything we know is known by mercy. Carl F. H. Henry describes this mercy of revelation, by speaking of it as, “God’s willful disclosure, whereby He forfeits His own personal privacy that His creatures might know Him.”<sup>4</sup>

We have no claim upon God and there is no way that we could ever figure him out. If we are to know him, he must speak—and he has! In the third volume of his magisterial *God, Revelation and Authority*, Henry said this:

If divine revelation in terms of speech means anything, it implies among other things that God need not have thus disclosed Himself. God might indeed have remained silent and incommunicative in relation to His creatures; His revelational speech to mankind is not an inevitability of the ultimate nature of things. God's speaking is a venture of divine determination and initiative. It is not to be likened to the mathematically quite predictable spurting of the geyser Old Faithful; instead, like an enigmatic weather pattern, its performance cannot be charted in advance, and in crucial ways it is once-for-all rather than merely sporadic. Even God's extended and ongoing speech in general or universal revelation is moment by moment, precept by precept, a matter of voluntary divine engagement, an address to mankind that carries ever and anon the utmost urgency.<sup>5</sup>

God mercifully lets his people hear. Thus, intellectual pride is the enemy of any true knowledge of God, any real theological education. There is nothing we can figure out or discover. There is no "Aha!" moment where, in some theological laboratory, a new element of divine truth gets discovered. We know by grace and mercy.

Third, *if God has spoken, we too must speak*. There is a command here to preach and teach. Again and again, Israel receives this order to speak, and in like manner, the church also is under this standing order. We preach and we teach and we speak, because God has spoken. Because God has spoken, we dare not remain silent. There is a task here. There is urgency here. We are to be the speaking people of a speaking God. The people of God are *not* to be marked by their silence, but by their speech.

Throughout the warp and woof of Scripture, this teaching mandate is constant. If we skip two chapters forward to Deuteronomy 6, we see Israel being reminded of the responsibility of parents to teach their children. In Nehemiah 8, the importance of this was made clear as Ezra and his colleagues read the text aloud and explained its meaning to the congregation. For the church, the command is just as clear. We are to set forth the truth and make it plain, because if God has spoken, we too must speak.

Fourth, *if God has spoken, then it is all about God, and it is all for our good*. You see, God does speak words of judgment in the Scripture, and God does speak words of warning. Indeed, there are hard words in Scripture, but it is all for our good! God spoke to Israel even the words of warning, in order that Israel might hear the warnings, obey the word, and not

suffer the inevitable consequences of disobedience. It is all for our good, every single word. That is why in Deuteronomy 4 we are warned not to add to these words or take away from these words. They are all for our good, like medicine for the soul and food for the body.

Fifth, *if God has spoken, it is for our redemption*. When we think of the work of God in our salvation, we focus of course in the culmination and the fulfillment of God's saving work in the accomplished work of Christ on the cross. But to read the Scripture is to understand that God has been a redeeming saving God from the very beginning— taking Israel out of Egypt was redemption. Keeping Israel alive, even in the wilderness, was redemption. Speaking to Israel and letting Israel hear and survive was redemption.

Jonathan Edwards well understood this. Speaking of this passage, he says the following:

This was quite a new thing that God did towards this great work of redemption. God had never done anything like it before. "Did ever people hear the voice of God speaking out of the midst of the fire and live? Or has God assayed to go and take Him a nation that the Lord your God did for you in Egypt?" This was a great advancement of the work of redemption that had been begun and carried out from the fall of man, a great step taken in divine providence towards a preparation for Christ's coming in the world, in working out His great and eternal redemption. For this was the people of whom Christ was to come, and now we see, we may see how that plant flourished that God had planted in Abraham.<sup>6</sup>

God allowing Israel at Horeb, and thereafter, to hear and to survive, was a part of his work of redemption—and revelation is for our redemption, we need to remember that. So often, I think even evangelical Christians speak of revelation at times as if it is something that witnesses to redemption, but it is also a part of God's work of redemption in and of itself, for without revelation, we would not know. We would have no clue. But we do know.

Sixth, *if God has spoken, we must obey*. This is not a word submitted for our consideration. The living God allows us to hear the voice of God from the fire and survive. It is because he has demands to make of us, as Creator speaks to his creatures. And in the giving of the Torah, and the entire body of law and statute and command, there is the requirement of obedience,

and it is repeated over and over again. It is stated in principle form, as Israel is told, “If you obey, you will be blessed and you will live. You will prosper in the land that I am giving you.” It is in the negative. “If you disobey, you will be cursed. You will bear my wrath. The nations of the world will cast you out. You will go out before them, to be taken as their exiles. You will be cast out of the land.”

The demand of obedience is very clear, and it is central to Deuteronomy 4. Even as the Lord God through Moses is preparing his people to enter the Promised Land, and in order to prepare them is getting ready to recite again the law, these Ten Words—the Ten Commandments—he is saying to them, “Look, it is about obedience. I’m not giving you this information. I’m not letting you hear my voice for your intellectual stimulation. It is not so that you will have an epistemological advantage over the pagan peoples around you! I am allowing you to hear my voice so that you may hear and then obey.”

Seventh, *if God has spoken, we must trust*. “Trust and obey, for there is no other way to be happy in Jesus, but to trust and obey.”<sup>7</sup> We know that song, or at least some previous generations knew that song. But it really is a matter of trust. Because of the spirit of the age and because of the imperative of the health of the church, we must fashion a clear defense of Scripture in terms of its inspiration and authority and perfection. We must teach that truth, remind ourselves of that truth, and be accountable to that. But in the end, it all comes down to trust—a hermeneutic of trust, an epistemology of trust, a spirituality and theology of trust.

If God has spoken, we trust his Word because we trust in *him*. Woe unto anyone who would sow seeds of mistrust or distrust of the Word of God. To fail to trust this Word is, as Israel was clearly told, to fail to trust in God himself. Truth is the very foundation of a proper Christian apologetic. An apologetic of trust, understands that in the end, the character of God is what anchors, not only our epistemology, but our redemption. This is the hope we have not only in this life, but in the life to come. We heard his voice, we read his Word, and implied in Deuteronomy 4 is the incription, the writing of this Word. It is very clear that this is to be now a word that, having been heard, is now written and is accessible to Israel through the reading of the Word, the Word we trust.

Eighth, *if God has spoken, we must witness*, declaring the revealed truth. Deuteronomy 4 has a counterpart in chapter 30 at the end of the book. As Moses now prepares to die, the Lord speaks, beginning in verse 11, and says the following:

For this commandment which I command you today is not too difficult for you, nor is it out of reach. But the word is very near you, in your mouth and in your heart, that you may observe it. See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, and death and adversity; in that I command you today to love the Lord your God, to walk in His ways and to keep His commandments and His statutes and His judgments, that you may live and multiply, and that the Lord your God may bless you in the land where you are entering to possess it. But if your heart turns away and you will not obey, but are drawn away and worship other gods and serve them, I declare to you today that you shall surely perish. You will not prolong your days in the land where you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess it. I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. So choose life in order that you may live, you and your descendants, by loving the Lord your God, by obeying His voice, and by holding fast to Him (Deut 30:11, 14–20).

Three points jump out at us here—love the Lord your God, obey his voice, and hold fast to Him. But look also in the New Testament at Romans 10:8–17, where the apostle Paul uses this very text from Deuteronomy and says:

But what does it say? “The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart”—that is, the word of faith which we are preaching, that if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved; for with the heart a person believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation. For the Scripture says, “Whoever believes in Him will not be disappointed.” For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, abounding in riches for all who call on Him; for “Whoever will call on the name of the Lord will be saved.” How then will they call on Him in whom they have not believed? How will they believe in Him whom they have not heard? And how will they hear without a preacher? How will they preach unless they are sent? Just as it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news of good things!” However, they did not all heed the good news; for Isaiah says, “Lord, who has believed our report?” So faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ.

So, faith in God comes from hearing the voice of God. Hearing and yet surviving. This too explains why we ourselves believe, for according to the formula and logic of Romans 10, somehow we have heard God’s

revelation. Not one of us was at Horeb, yet we have heard. Someone had to tell. God spoke, and someone had to speak to us. And as the Word of God makes so very clear, there is the mandate for us to go and to tell. If God has spoken, then we do know. If God has spoken, then we are accountable. If God has spoken, it is by mercy and for our good, and if God has spoken, it comes with a commission and a command, which makes a difference of course in the life of a Christian, who is not only the one who has been saved, but instrumentally and day by day, is the one who was heard.

The difference for the church is that we understand what it means to gather together as the ones who by the grace and mercy of God have heard. Under the authority of the Word we gather. We are not making this up as we go along. Our task is not to go figure out what to teach. Our task is not to figure out where to find meaning in life. It is to be reminded continually that we have heard the voice of God speaking from the fire and have survived, and thus we teach.

This is the mercy of God, to hear and yet survive. It is the mercy by which we live every day and experience every moment and evaluate every truth claim and judge every worldview and preach every sermon. We work and we live under that mercy. I cannot help connecting Deuteronomy 4 with Hebrews 1. The experience of Israel— hearing the Lord God speak from the midst of the fire and yet surviving—ties in so beautifully with the prologue of the book of Hebrews: “Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world” (vv. 1–2).

We are here because God has spoken, not only in the fire, but also in the Son—in whose name we gather as the church and in whose name we serve. The voice at Horeb points to its ultimate fulfillment in the incarnation of Jesus Christ, the Word of God incarnate. For beyond the miracle of Israel hearing God’s voice and surviving, we can now know the Word of God made flesh and be saved.

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<sup>1</sup> Eugene Merrill, *Deuteronomy* (New American Commentary; Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1994), 130-31.

<sup>2</sup> Christopher J. H. Wright, *Deuteronomy* (New International Biblical Commentary; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996), 55.

<sup>3</sup> Francis A. Schaeffer, *The Francis A. Schaeffer Trilogy* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1990), 158-60.

<sup>4</sup> Carl F. H. Henry, *God Who Speaks and Shows*, vol. 3 of *God, Revelation and Authority* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1999), 405.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Jonathan Edwards, “A History of the Work of Redemption,” vol. 5 of *The Works of President Edwards* (London: Hughes and Baynes, 1817), 54-55.

<sup>7</sup> John H. Sammis and Daniel B. Towner, “Trust and Obey,” *The Baptist Hymnal* (Nashville, TN: Convention Press, 1991). In public domain.