



# First Baptist Pulpit

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Preached by Pastor David Saylor

## A Beautiful Mind

### 1 Samuel 3:1-10

He was hailed as one of the most brilliant minds of the twentieth century. The word genius was an understatement. His thesis on the dynamics of human conflict would revolutionize economic theory and eventually win the Nobel Prize. He did this work while still in college and before he was out of his twenties he was a distinguished professor at MIT.

But at the height of his career John Nash suffered a breakdown. He interrupted a lecture to announce he was on the cover of Life magazine disguised as the Pope. He claimed foreign governments were communicating with him through the media, and he turned down a prestigious post at the University of Chicago because, he said, he was about to be named Emperor of Antarctica.

In the movie, *A Beautiful Mind*, we see the characters and hear the voices that exist only in his head, unconnected to reality. They made him feel important—as if he were the center of the universe. They played on his darkest fears. When he listened to them, they destroyed his relationships, distorted his perceptions, made him obsessive, irrational, and terrified.

Paranoid delusion is not something to joke about. The most difficult feature of this condition is that the voices seem absolutely real. To tell John Nash they were not real would be like asking you or me to distrust the existence of our boss or best friend or mother.

What makes this true story so remarkable is that he was actually able to learn, over time, the art of discernment. He learned to test the voices, to find out which ones were false and which ones were true.

He had to learn not to listen to the ones that lead to death. He learned not to dwell on what they said. He learned not to do what they requested. And while never completely freed

from his illness, he discovered that over time their hold on his mind could be greatly weakened. He experienced, in a sense, a revolution of the mind.

#### "WE ALL HEAR VOICES"

Nash speaks at one point in the film about how in a way his battle is the battle of all of us. *"I'm not so different from you,"* he says to his friend. *"We all hear voices. We just have to decide which ones we are going to listen to."*

- Two people suffer from cancer. One becomes bitter and despairing while the other is a beacon of hope to the people around them. Their cancer is the same. *The difference is in their minds.*
- Two people live with meager financial resources. One of them is consumed by envy and discontent; the other is radiant with gratitude and servanthood. Their net worth is the same. *The difference is in their minds.*
- Two people reach the top of their organizations. One uses power selfishly and for control; the other uses it to enhance the lives of everyone in the community. Their titles are the same. *The difference is in their minds.*
- **Two people live in a universe where God is always present.** One of them decides that "in my thoughts there is no room for God." The other is like Samuel who eventually says, *"Speak Lord, for your servant is listening."* -- and he hears God's voice. God's offer of availability is the same. *The difference is in their minds.*

The mind is an instrument of staggering potential. But its potential is not measured by IQ or academic degrees, for it is in our minds that we live in conscious awareness of, and interaction with God.

Throughout history, people who walked with God have insisted that they hear his voice. They have learned, so to speak, to program their minds to be constantly receiving the divine channel. *"The*

*word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so you may obey it.*" (Deut. 30:14).

Now it's our turn. Today we start looking at how to cultivate the kind of mind that is receptive to God's presence and voice. If we are ever to experience the closeness of God, it means a revolution of the mind. How do I make my mind the kind of place where God dwells?

## I. I MUST BELIEVE THAT GOD REALLY WILL SPEAK TO ME

If we are going to be in a personal relationship with anyone, there must be some two-way communication.

Even the most uncommunicative husband has to grunt every once in a while or it isn't a marriage—it's a monologue. The God of the Bible is not limited to grunting.

Being with God is something that takes place *primarily in our thoughts, our mind*. Even at the purely human level, being with someone is never purely physical.

Two people may occupy space in the same room, but if one of them is sleeping or in a coma—or perhaps engrossed in watching a playoff basketball game—they are not really with each other.

Being with another person requires awareness. I am aware that you are with me, and the things that you do and say are influencing the stream of thoughts and feelings going on inside me. We interact.

Because we are physical beings, we use our bodies in the process of being with someone. Because we are finite, we do not have "direct access" to each other's thoughts. You make audible sounds or touch me or gesture with your hands, and in so doing you influence or guide my thoughts.

But God is infinite rather than finite, so he is able to guide our thoughts directly. He can speak to us through Scripture, of course, *or* through the words of another person. But he also has "direct access," so to speak; he can plant a thought directly in our minds. Anytime. Anywhere. In other words, it is possible that any given thought that runs through our minds might have been guided there by God—and, like Samuel, we may not even know it.

This means that one of the key places where we meet God will be in our minds. Thoughts happen. And some of those thoughts come from God.

## II. THERE ARE NO FORMULAS

There is much about God's speaking that is mystery to me. One thing I know for sure: There are no formulas. I cannot control God's communicating with me. I cannot force him to speak through my piety, sincerity, or hard work.

One Friday morning I was in my office and was sweating bullets over a sermon that refused to be born, or even conceived. This is not very comfortable feeling, believe you me. There are times when, in spite of prayer and close communion with God and doing all the careful, diligent study and preparation - still I can not hear from God.

I cannot force God to give me the guidance or the help I think I need. There may be a good reason for his remaining silent sometimes.

At the human level, wise parents and good friends often recognize the need for silence, so surely at the divine level, God does as well.

So we cannot force God's speaking, but there is a role for us to play. We can, by choice and by our actions, invite God to be present in our mind. Or we can close the door to him. It all depends on what kind of mind we want to cultivate.

## III. TAKING EVERY THOUGHT CAPTIVE

**2 Corinthians 10:5** *We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.*

We might think about it this way: There is a ceaseless stream of thoughts running through your mind at lightning speed. Picture each thought as a bead strung across a wire.



Right now you are looking at this diagram. Then you notice the hair on the person's head in front of you is turning gray. Then you think about your own aging and you wonder if you are not looking so hot anymore. Then you catch yourself, at which point your mind turns back to this message.

This is your mind. You are having a series of thoughts. You are having thoughts, observations, perceptions, and ideas at such a staggering rate that you don't even remember the vast majority of them.

*God is never more than "a thought" away.* Frank Laubach wrote,

"We can't keep two things in mind at once. Indeed, we cannot keep one thing in mind more than half a second. The Mind is a flowing something. It oscillates.

Concentration is merely the continuous return to the same problem from a million angles. So my problem is this: **can I bring God back in my mind-flow every few seconds so that God shall always be in my mind as an after-image, shall always be one of the elements in every concept and precept?** I choose to make the rest of my life an experiment in answering this question."



In reality, each thought we have carries with it a little spiritual power, a tug toward or away from God. No thought is purely neutral.

Every thought is either enabling and strengthening you to be able to cope with reality to live a "kingdom kind of life," or robbing you of that life.

Every thought is—at least to a small extent—*God-breathed* or *God-avoidant*; leading to death or leading toward life.

In time, if we listen carefully, we can learn to recognize his voice. Not infallibly, of course. But the kind of thoughts that come from God are those in line with the Bible. And we will learn that there are other thoughts that are not likely to be God speaking. For instance, nowhere in the Bible does it say, "And then God worried." So I can be quite confident that thoughts that move me toward a *paralyzed anxiety* are not from God.

Remember, every thought holds the promise of carrying me into God's presence.

### SAYING "YES" WHEN HE SPEAKS

What does it look like when God "guides our thoughts"?

It begins with the little things. Friday I was driving and I was in a bit of a hurry. What's new? Now I'm kind of an aggressive driver - my skills were honed during my commuting years into Boston. I'm in a line of cars that are turning into the entrance road to Hartford Hospital. There is a lady on the side of the road, holding a baby, waiting to cross, standing in the light rain. She's not at a crosswalk and all the cars in front of me move steadily along by her. That's my plan too, except suddenly a thought comes, "This is a hospital, she might have a sick baby, stop and let her cross."

Now, was this thought from God? I can't prove it, of course, but it seemed like the kind of thing that he would say. I stopped and let her cross. I know what a small act it was. Someone farther down the road to servanthood than I wouldn't have hesitated at all; they would have just seen it. *But God is gracious to communicate to us even at the point of our immaturity in a way that we can understand.*

Our job is to be ruthless about saying "yes" everytime we believe God is speaking to us! Every time we do, we will get a little more sensitive to hearing him the next time. Our mind becomes a little more receptive, a little more tuned in to God's channel.

On the other hand, when we say "No, I'm not stopping, I'm too busy," we make ourselves a little less likely to hear him in the future.

It begins with all the little things, daily thoughts -- when we say "yes" to them then He can guide us in the "bigger" things too.

### THINKING GOD'S THOUGHTS

AND if we are going to "think God's thoughts, if we are going to take every thought captive, then we have to begin to make our minds a home for Jesus. We must deliberately fill our minds with the kinds of things God says are important. Paul puts it like this in Phil. 4:8: *"Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things."*

Whatever repeatedly enters the mind occupies the mind, eventually shapes the mind, and will ultimately express itself in what you do and who you become.

The events we attend, the material we read (or don't), the music we listen to, the images we watch, the conversations we hold, the daydreams we entertain—these are shaping our minds. And ultimately they make our minds receptive or deaf toward the still small voice of God.

### IV. DISCERNING WHICH VOICE IS GODS

However, we know that not every thought comes from God. They can be *our thoughts* or worse. How do we know?

First off, there is no substitute for knowing **the Bible** and what God has already taught. He will never guide you in a different direction.

After that, God often uses **other people** to help us discern his voice. There are certain people in your life whose words consistently guide you toward God. Be sure you make time for those people.

In a scene toward the end of the movie, *A Beautiful Mind*, John Nash, who has not lost, but has learned to ignore the

delusional voices and is now a professor again, comes out of the classroom and encounters a man waiting to speak to him whom he has never seen before. Let's watch the scene.

The man says to Nash, "I've come to talk with you about being awarded the Nobel Prize."

Nash is silent for a moment. He has suffered too much from listening to voices of grandiosity. He is not going to listen to the voice on his own. He stops one of his students: "Excuse me—do you see a man standing here? Is he in your line of vision? Is he for real?"

The student says yes, so Nash turns to the man: "Okay. I'll listen to you now."

That is a humbling thing for a man with a brilliant mind to have to do. Nash learned to lean into community to discern which voices are worth listening to and which are delusional.

We can do that. The spirit of Jesus speaks through the community of Jesus. When you are not sure about a voice, go to some trusted friends and discuss it. Is this voice giving a true sense of conviction or neurotic guilt? Is this a calling or just grandiosity? Lean into community.

#### HOMEWORK

1. Take Psalm 16 and meditate on it and few verses of the time this week. (Imagine, "What would my life look like if I lived out these words?")

2. Work on becoming aware of your every thought and listen for which ones may be implanted there by God himself.