

# BILL HYBELS

with Ashley Wiersma

T H E P O W E R O F A

# WHISPER

HEARING GOD.  
HAVING THE GUTS TO RESPOND.

PARTICIPANT'S GUIDE  
Four Sessions

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**BILL HYBELS**

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Requests for information should be addressed to:  
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# CONTENTS

|  |    |
|--|----|
| <i>Preface: Read This First</i>  | 7  |
| <i>Foreword: Seizing Your “Miss Van Soelen”<br/>Moment, by Bill Hybels</i> | 13 |
| SESSION 1 The Whisper-Led Life   | 17 |
| SESSION 2 Divine Input for the Day-to-Day                                  | 33 |
| SESSION 3 Practice, Practice, Practice                                     | 49 |
| SESSION 4 Wide Open for Good   | 67 |
| <i>Endnotes</i>  | 87 |
| <i>Group Roster: Names, Numbers, Notes</i>                                 | 88 |
| <i>Participant’s Notes</i>   | 92 |



## PREFACE

# READ THIS FIRST

*If you are looking for something super-personal,  
then it is not a question of choosing between  
the Christian idea and the other ideas.  
The Christian idea is the only one on the market.*

**C. S. Lewis**

**W**ELCOME TO *THE POWER OF A WHISPER* FOUR-SESSION journey toward getting better at hearing from God and getting bolder about obeying what he asks us to do. You're in for quite a ride as you explore what it means to let input from heaven navigate your life here on earth! Before you dive in, skim the following notes, which will set you up for success in your small-group setting.

## Group Preparation

Whether your small group has been meeting together for years or is convening for the first time to engage with this curriculum, be sure to designate a consistent time and place to work through the four sessions that follow. For example, consider meeting for an hour on four consecutive Tuesday mornings or Wednesday evenings or Sunday afternoons at a local coffee shop, in a group member's living room, at a nearby park or in a common gathering area at your church.

Once you establish the when and where of your times together, select a facilitator who will keep discussions on track and an eye on the clock. If you choose to rotate this responsibility, assign the four sessions to their respective facilitators upfront, so that group members can prepare their thoughts and questions prior to the session they are responsible for leading.

## A Note to Facilitators

As facilitator, you are responsible for honoring the sixty-minute timeframe of each meeting, for catalyzing helpful discussion among your group, and for keeping the dialogue equitable by drawing out quieter members and helping more talkative members to remember that others' insights are valued in your group.

You might find it helpful to preview each session's video teaching segment and then scan the "Group Discussion" questions that pertain to it, highlighting various questions that you want to be sure to cover during your group's meeting. Ask God in advance of your time together to guide your group's discussion, and then be sensitive to the direction he wishes to lead.

## Session Format

Each session includes five parts that are intended for the small-group experience:

- **Opening prayer** [allow 3 minutes] — words to help you devote your group time to God
- **“Getting Going” question** [allow 5 minutes] — a simple icebreaker that relates to the session topic and invites input from every group member as the meeting begins
- **Video-based teaching** [allow 20–25 minutes] — practical help from pastor and author Bill Hybels regarding how to hear from God and how to meticulously obey the instruction you receive
- **Group discussion** [allow 25–30 minutes] — questions and exercises that reinforce the session content and elicit personal input from every group member
- **“Giving the Whisper-Led Life a Try” challenge** [allow 2 minutes] — an easy-to-implement opportunity to practice the ideas introduced during each session before your group convenes again

Additionally, you will find an “Individual Reflection” segment at the end of each session that includes a recap of the content covered, as well as questions and exercises for group members to explore on their own between group meetings.

Prior to each session, group members will be encouraged to read two to three chapters from Bill Hybels’s hardcover book, *The Power of a Whisper: Hearing God, Having the Guts to Respond* (Zondervan, 2010). While these readings certainly help flesh out participants’ understanding of the concepts covered in each



session's video segment, they shouldn't be considered prerequisites to engaging in group discussions.

Hopefully, you and your group will discover inspiring stories, practical teaching points and helpful discussion starters throughout each of the four sessions. Enjoy the glimpse into what a whisper-led life can look like when God's people prioritize hearing from heaven and following the direction they receive!

## Personal Preparation

Referring to the relationship between devoted followers of Christ and their Good Shepherd, Jesus said, "My sheep listen to my voice" (John 10:27).<sup>1</sup> If there is one goal for this four-session experience, it is precisely that — that you would learn to pick out the voice of God from the cacophony of other voices vying for your attention each day. And then, that you would choose to obey.

If you share this goal, then commit now that for all four sessions, you will be still, you will push aside other priorities, you will seek to engage this content with your full attention and you will focus on hearing from God — frequently, consistently and intimately.

Practically, you'll want to bring the following items to each group meeting:

- Your Bible
- Your copy of the book, *The Power of a Whisper: Hearing God, Having the Guts to Respond*
- This participant's guide and a pen

Rest assured that your earnest preparation for and serious devotion to this experience will yield great things in your life. "Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own

READ THIS FIRST

understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him,” Proverbs 3:5–6 promises, “and he will make your paths straight.” What a thrill it is to know that when you allow God to guide your steps, those steps will fall on a perfectly straight path.

Let the whisper-led journey begin!



## FOREWORD

# SEIZING YOUR “MISS VAN SOELEN” MOMENT

BY BILL HYBELS

THE FIRST ACKNOWLEDGMENT IN MY BOOK, *THE POWER OF A WHISPER*, went to my second-grade teacher, Miss Van Soelen. Decades ago, she was the one who taught a Bible story to my class of seven-year-olds about Samuel, a young boy who heard voices in the middle of the night. As the story went, Samuel would get out of bed, go find his mentor, Eli, and say, “You called me?” To which Eli would say, “I didn’t call you. Go back to bed.”<sup>2</sup>

This happened three times, and finally Eli said to Samuel, “Next time you hear a voice, say, ‘Speak, Lord, your servant is listening.’”

So, obedient child that he was, Samuel went back to bed; he heard the voice again and dutifully said, “Speak, Lord, your servant is listening.”

Amazingly, God actually spoke. He spoke a very important message to young Samuel that he was to convey to Eli the following day.

Miss Van Soelen finished telling that story one afternoon just as the recess bell rang. The sound of that bell usually launched me from my seat and out the door in a matter of seconds, but that day, as all of my classmates rushed out, I sat transfixed at my small wooden desk.

I was glued to my chair because of the nature of that story, a story of the King of the entire universe actually *speaking* to someone on earth.

Very timidly, after all of the other kids had made their way outside, I walked to the front of the classroom and said, "Miss Van Soelen, does God still speak to little boys today?"

She looked me right in the eye and said, "*Absolutely*, God still speaks."

Just then, she reached into the top drawer of her desk, pulled out a slip of paper, and handed it to me. She said, "I've been keeping this here, but maybe you'd like to have it now, based on what we just talked about ..."

I said thanks, jabbed the folded-up piece of paper into my pants pocket and headed outside to play.

Later that night, just before I climbed into bed, I reached for those pants and pulled out the crumpled piece of paper. On it was written a poem — a poem I liked so much that I decided to memorize it.

The next day, I went to school. Once that afternoon's Bible story had come and gone and the recess bell had rung, Miss Van Soelen caught me midstride as I rushed to the baseball field. "Did you read that poem I gave you?" she asked.

I told my teacher that not only had I read it, but that I had committed it to memory, a fact I thought might cause her to faint then and there. "You *did*?" she asked, shock written all over her face.

She challenged me to recite the poem, and I did:

*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.*<sup>3</sup>

The look on Miss Van Soelen's face when I finished my recitation was priceless. With a pride-filled grin on her face, she placed her heavy hands on my small shoulders and said, “Billy Hybels, if you listen for the voice of God and obey it, I think he will not only speak to you throughout your days, but he will also infuse your life with *great* power.”

Since those boyhood days, I have repeated that little poem perhaps tens of thousands of times. And it has called me to new levels of obedience every time.

Several weeks ago, I received an advance copy of the book, *The Power of a Whisper*, from my publisher. As I held that book in my hand and saw the near-final version for the first time, I thought, “This entire thing traces all the way back to an ordinary afternoon in the second grade, when Miss Van Soelen introduced me to the idea that God really does speak to his children . . . and that if I'm careful to learn to hear his voice, he might even speak to me.”

Right then, as the thought was still spinning through my mind, my assistant stepped into my office holding a printed copy of an email she had just received and said, “Bill, you'd better sit down. I have some bad news.”

I sat down as the words formed on her lips: “Your second-grade teacher has died . . .”

She handed me the piece of paper, and as I held my new book

in one hand and that disheartening news in the other, I marveled at the timing of life.

My schedule was filled to the brim with appointments, both that day and the next, but a whisper from God came through, loud and clear. "Attend her funeral," he seemed to say. "Cancel what you need to cancel, and get to her hometown today."

I thought about it, I prayed about it and I decided that's exactly what I would do.

As I stood by Miss Van Soelen's casket the following morning, I considered how one five-minute conversation with one caring woman changed the course of my entire life. Silently and reverently, I thanked her for the immeasurable impact she'd had on me, and as I drove away from that funeral, I rededicated myself to the idea of living with one ear open to heaven each and every day.

Part of the reason I am so passionate about the curriculum you are about to explore is that I believe a "Miss Van Soelen" moment is awaiting you, an occasion when you come face to face with the undeniable truth that God still speaks to his children, and that, most likely, he is wanting to speak to you. Ready to find out if I'm right?

South Haven, Michigan  
April 2010

SESSION 1

# THE WHISPER-LED LIFE




*The knowledge that we are never alone  
calms the troubled sea of our lives  
and speaks peace to our souls.*

**A. W. Tozer**



## What to Expect, Session 1

In this session, you'll be introduced to Gerry Couchman, a man who is living a whisper-led life, and invited to join him in the greatest adventure Christ-followers can know: allowing input from heaven to direct their journey here on earth. To prepare for session 1, skim the following three chapters from Bill Hybels's *The Power of a Whisper: Hearing God, Having the Guts to Respond*:

-  Ch. 1, "Samuel's Ear"
-  Ch. 4, "How to Know When You're Hearing from God"
-  Ch. 10, "Just Say the Word"

## Opening Prayer

*Focus your group on devoting this hour to God by praying the prayer below.*

"God, thank you for your willingness to speak into our hearts, our days and our lives. As we focus on what a whisper-led life might look like over the course of this next hour, we give you full permission to challenge and convict us, as well as to comfort us with your unparalleled care. Thanks for being here with us today. Amen."

---

## Getting Going

---

*As your group prepares to view this session's video content, briefly share your response to the following question:*

What is one of the most memorable things God has ever prompted you to do?

---

## Video Notes

---

*In the space below, record your observations regarding this session's video, as well as any personal promptings God lays on your mind and heart.*

“The awareness of God’s presence in your life is the most transformative knowledge there is.”

**Bill Hybels**

## Group Discussion

*After viewing the session 1 video, answer the questions that follow in full group.*

1. First things first: What stood out to you regarding Gerry Couchman's kidney-donation story?
  
2. Gerry described two specific whispers that he has received along the way — one to donate his kidney and one to persevere in his work serving local-church pastors. Can you relate? How frequently is your life guided by “divine input from above”?
  
3. How do you determine when a whisper you receive is really from God? What does your “whisper test” typically include?

4. Following Gerry's story, Bill Hybels mentioned five "filters" he uses to discern whether the voice he is sensing is God's. If you were to receive a divine nudge or prompting today regarding a pressing situation you face, which of these test-questions would you be most likely to ask, and which might you neglect to explore? Explain why to your group.

- "God, is this prompting truly from you?"
- "Is the whisper scriptural?"
- "Is it wise?"
- "Is it in tune with my own character or wiring?"
- "What do the people I most trust think about it?"

"There is an intimate relationship between the Shepherd and the sheep which is always initiated by the Shepherd himself. But there is something for the sheep to do when he enters the fold. He has to be willing to hear and respond to the Shepherd's voice."

**Rosalind Rinker**

5. What does a person stand to gain by learning to slow down and *thoroughly* test every whisper he or she receives?

6. Tucked in the middle of Isaiah 30, a chapter that lays out a litany of tough condemnations against a people group that refused to listen to God, is this inspiring verse: “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’” (Isaiah 30:21).

As you consider improving your “spiritual hearing” during these next few sessions, what does a promise like that from God mean to you?

7. For Gerry Couchman, the “way” in which he was asked to walk involved great personal and physical sacrifice. How willing would you be to walk in the way God leads you, even if physical, financial, emotional, vocational or some other form of sacrifice on your part was required?

8. Toward the end of this session’s video, Bill Hybels said, “God is looking for ‘just say the word’ Christ-followers, women and men who will do *whatever* it takes to follow the promptings they receive.” The idea is based on the story from Matthew 8:5–13 of the centurion who asked Jesus to heal the soldier’s servant (see chapter 10 of *The Power of a Whisper*, which you read in preparation for this week’s session).

Based on your life experience thus far, how open have you been to following divine input from above? Place an “X” on the continuum at the top of the next page, and then explain your rationale for that placement to the group.

GROUP DISCUSSION, SESSION 1

Before now, I'd never  
really considered  
that God was  
speaking to me.

I listen for God's  
whispers every day  
and try to do exactly  
what he asks.

9. Regardless of where you may find yourself on the “just say the word” spectrum above, what words of reassurance does Isaiah 58:11 offer you today? (See shaded box for text.)

“I will always show you where to go. I'll give you a full life in the emptiest of places — firm muscles, strong bones. You'll be like a well-watered garden, a gurgling spring that never runs dry.”

**Isaiah 58:11 (MSG)**



## Giving the Whisper-Led Life a Try

*Agree to engage in the following activity before your group meets for session 2 and to come to that meeting prepared to discuss your experience.*

Bill Hybels closed this week's video with an invitation to live with a "higher goal," the goal of never wanting to miss another whisper from God for the rest of our lives.

Between now and when your group meets again, get alone before your heavenly Father and ask him to help you prioritize the "higher" goal of hearing from him. On the grid that follows, note the three or four aspirations that are top-of-mind for you these days. Then, beside each, jot down a few questions that invite God to speak into that goal (an example has been provided). Also, as you interact with your heavenly Father, pay attention to goals that he may be asking you to set aside for now, as well as new ones he prompts you to add to your list.

| <b>My Current Goals</b>    | <b>Questions I Have of God</b>  |
|----------------------------|---|
| [example] Get out of debt. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How am I supposed to tithe, when money is this tight?</li> <li>• What needs should go unmet while I work to get out of debt?</li> <li>• What do you want me to learn through this process?</li> <li>• In what ways should my lifestyle shift, once I'm finally out of debt?</li> </ul> |
|                            |   |

GROUP DISCUSSION, SESSION 1

| <b>My Current Goals</b> | <b>Questions I Have of God</b> |
|-------------------------|--------------------------------|
|                         |                                |
|                         |                                |
|                         |                                |

Take time before your next small-group meeting to pose your questions before God. Ask him for timely, divine input, and in the space below, note the input that you receive in reply.

# INDIVIDUAL REFLECTION

## SESSION 1

*Before you meet with your group for session 2, take some time on your own to review and pray through the big ideas from this session's content as well as the Sitting with the Subject Matter section that follows.*

### The Big Ideas

- God promises in Isaiah 30 that even today his followers can and will hear his voice saying, “This is the way; walk in it.”
- As you learn to hear from God, these five questions will help you discern whether a whisper truly was heaven-sent:
  1. “God, is this prompting truly from you?”
  2. “Is the whisper scriptural?”
  3. “Is it wise?”
  4. “Is it in tune with my own character or wiring patterns?”
  5. “What do the people I most trust think about it?”
- Like the centurion whose story is told in Matthew 8, God is looking for women and men who have a “just say the word” posture toward obeying the whispers they receive, even when those promptings require personal sacrifice.

## Sitting with the Subject Matter

**READ: *1 Kings 19:1–13***

First Kings 19:1–13 (see shaded box) details the story of the prophet Elijah hearing God’s voice not in a mighty wind, an earthquake or a raging fire, but in what the text calls a “gentle whisper.”

“Now Ahab told Jezebel everything Elijah had done and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. So Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah to say, ‘May the gods deal with me, be it ever so severely, if by this time tomorrow I do not make your life like that of one of them.’

“Elijah was afraid and ran for his life. When he came to Beersheba in Judah, he left his servant there, while he himself went a day’s journey into the desert. He came to a broom tree, sat down under it and prayed that he might die. ‘I have had enough, LORD,’ he said. ‘Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors.’ Then he lay down under the tree and fell asleep.

“All at once an angel touched him and said, ‘Get up and eat.’ He looked around, and there by his head was a cake of bread baked over hot coals, and a jar of water. He ate and drank and then lay down again.

“The angel of the LORD came back a second time and touched him and said, ‘Get up and eat, for the journey is too much for you.’ So he got up and ate and drank. Strengthened by that food, he traveled forty days and forty nights until he reached Horeb, the mountain of God. There he went into a cave and spent the night. And the word of the LORD came to him: ‘What are you doing here, Elijah?’

“He replied, ‘I have been very zealous for the LORD God

Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, broken down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too.'

"The LORD said, 'Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by.'

"Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake came a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper. When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave."

**1 Kings 19:1–13**

**REFLECT: *When have you heard the “gentle whisper” of God in your own life?***

In *The Power of a Whisper: Hearing God, Having the Guts to Respond*, Bill Hybels says, “We serve a communicating God—a God of words. [Throughout Scripture, he] created with a word, he healed with a word, he encouraged with a word, he rebuked with a word, he guided with a word, he prophesied with a word, he assured with a word, he loved with a word, he served with a word and he comforted with a word. Throughout all of history, God has communicated, and he still is at it today. The issue isn’t whether or not God is speaking; it’s whether we will have ears to hear what he says.”<sup>4</sup>

In Bill’s own life, as he mentioned in this session’s video seg-

INDIVIDUAL REFLECTION, SESSION 1

ment, God’s “low-volume whispers” have saved him from a life of sure boredom and self-destruction. “His well-timed words have redirected my path,” Bill said, “rescued me from temptation and re-energized me during some of my deepest moments of despair.”

On the grid that follows, note occasions in your own life when God’s well-timed words have comforted you, rebuked you, provoked you to take action, invited you to experience greater freedom in some aspect of life and more. Record the whisper you received, the effect it had on you and what you did in response.

| <b>Whisper I Received</b>        | <b>Effect It Had on Me</b> | <b>How I Responded</b>           |
|----------------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------------|
| [example]<br>“I still love you.” | Comfort                    | Asked for forgiveness for my sin |
|                                  |                            |                                  |
|                                  |                            |                                  |
|                                  |                            |                                  |
|                                  |                            |                                  |
|                                  |                            |                                  |
|                                  |                            |                                  |
|                                  |                            |                                  |

THE POWER OF A WHISPER PARTICIPANT'S GUIDE

| Whisper I Received | Effect It Had on Me | How I Responded |
|--------------------|---------------------|-----------------|
|                    |                     |                 |
|                    |                     |                 |
|                    |                     |                 |

**RESPOND:** *Thank God today for his whispering ways.*

If you have never stopped to thank God for communicating directly with his children — including you! — then do so now. In the space below, write a prayer of thanksgiving that you serve a God who craves frequent, consistent and *intimate* communication with you. Then, read it aloud to him as a way of closing your time together.