

The Art of Listening Prayer

Finding God's Voice Amidst Life's Noise

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What is listening prayer?

Real Life Story

In the winter of 2002 my coworker, Deryck Livingston, and I traveled to Bethel College in Indiana. My friend, Professor Terry Linhart, had asked us to guest teach his class on discipleship. We prepared a lesson that was as interactive as we could make it. We felt the Lord asking us to demonstrate that he is alive and that he desires to communicate with us in a personal way. Deryck asked the class, “Who here has never really heard the Lord in a clear way?”

A number of hands went up.

“Would any of you volunteer to come up here so that we can pray and ask God to speak to you?”

One large young man named Ernest came forward to pray with Deryck. They sat there at the front of the class while everyone else either prayed or looked on. Although we believed that the Lord had directed us to go through this exercise, we did so with some trepidation. Would anything happen? The whole exercise required faith. We *believed* that God wants to speak to his children, but now we were putting our faith on the line. Ernest settled into the chair, and Deryck laid a hand on his shoulder and prayed.

It was a simple, sincere prayer. “Lord, here we are before you. I am sitting here with Ernest who has come forward to hear your voice, to know what you have to say to him. Would you reveal yourself to him as he seeks you now with all his heart?”

We waited in silence. We were expectant and curious, but still a little uncertain. How often do we just stop and wait expectantly on the Lord?

After a while Deryck quietly asked, “Ernest, have you heard anything? Has God laid anything on your heart?” Ernest nodded and said softly, “He wants me to know how much he loves me.” Deryck paused and then asked, “Can you receive that?” Again Ernest nodded and quietly said with some effort, “I’ve been trying so hard to do the right thing: to do well in school, make good choices, to please him.” He paused, then said with conviction and wonder, “But he just says he wants me to know he loves me, *really* loves me, and that all this other stuff doesn’t matter that much.”

Later, Deryck reflected how everything shifted at that moment. It had been an exercise, a demonstration that God will speak to us if we slow down enough to listen and allow him to speak to us. “I realized yet again that he is a living God with his own purpose, and here I was setting up a conversation. I suddenly felt awkward, like the time I called my mom to the phone to speak to my dad and lingered a little too long after she picked up. They were talking in a personal way and I got embarrassed. Up there in front of the class with Ernest, I again felt like I was intruding on a very personal, sacred conversation. All of a sudden the room full of people fell away, and I was just with Ernest, encouraging him as he opened up to God.”

The Lord loves Ernest so much, and he wanted him to know it. In that classroom, before he was done, Ernest not only heard God speak, but in his mind also saw a beautiful picture of himself reflecting God’s golden light. The change that came over Ernest was visible in his countenance. He was so excited; he finally *knew* God’s love and grace, and was relieved of a burden of performance. What a difference it made for him to know God’s love regardless of his efforts! He told us he could work for the joy of it now; that he wanted to make God smile.

“I need to spend more time like this just being with God. It was so cool just hanging out without trying to think of what to pray about. I realize now that even in prayer I was getting wrapped

up in my own concerns. Hey, maybe God doesn't take life so seriously. He might just want me to enjoy life with him.” There were nods and comments of agreement from classmates as Ernest marveled at his experience.

But not everyone was convinced. Ben, another student, said with some consternation, “I don't agree with all this. I think it's contrived. I'm glad Ernest had a good experience, but you can't just tell God what to do and expect him to do it right here, right now. I mean, he's *God*. We aren't! He speaks to us through his word and that's enough. Discipleship is training people in allowing him to speak to us through his word, not through our subjective feelings. Feelings come and go. I don't feel God is here right now, but that doesn't mean I don't believe in him, that I don't have a personal relationship with him. I pray to him and study his word and live my life in obedience to him and he guides me and loves me. I don't need to hear his voice. He speaks to me through his word; everything I need to know is in his word.”

We continued with a discussion about the many ways God speaks to us as revealed in Scripture. Ernest wanted everyone to try it like he did. “It helped me make a breakthrough today on something I have been struggling with all semester. What have you got to lose? I feel like I gained a closer relationship with God. I mean, I could talk to him about anything right now, and think he would respond. It's so simple, and yet here I am in a Christian college, taking a class on Discipleship, and I'm just realizing the difference between talking about listening to God and really listening. It's so simple it's stupid. We waste so much time trying to please God and do the right thing, and maybe he doesn't even really want that. Maybe he just wants to hang out with us and love on us. Wow! What a concept!”

It was difficult to lead an interactive class on discipleship; it really is more “caught than taught.” But when we decided to stop and just listen to God, it turned out the Lord had something

to say to Ernest that he was eager for him to hear. And because Ernest took a chance and just listened, he received that treasure of truth. Ernest now had a choice: to keep desperately trying to earn God's love, or to believe him, and let the Lord's unconditional love transform him from a slave into a son. Ernest chose wisely. He listened to God, and lives now as who he is: a much-loved son.

Skeptics like Ben

If at this point you identify more with Ben than Ernest, welcome to the party. Growing up in America isn't easy; we're a nation of skeptics. It's easier to take potshots at something than it is to embrace it. We've been disappointed so many times, seen so many promises come to nothing. We've read the papers, every day hearing a new story of some naïve soul getting duped. And in our own lives, we've prayed a hundred times for something and not once did God reach down out of heaven to answer us. The idea that God speaks to humans, that in fact he may be speaking to you this very day, may seem to contradict your experience. It's a wonder anybody is willing to consider the possibility! If you're a skeptic, you're in good company.

But if we're honest, many of us will admit a couple of things. First, who wouldn't want to be able to talk with their creator and hear him talking back? Wouldn't that be the most wonderful thing imaginable? Don't you hope against hope that it's possible?

And second, this "personal relationship with God" that we as a Church advertise to nonbelievers may not *feel* very personal at all. Somewhere along the line you may feel as though you've been sold a bill of goods. We're so saturated with doctrine that has little or no basis in our experience that we look and act like hypocrites. It's time you face the issue; trifling with God doesn't serve him – if our friends can see the unreality of our faith, then he certainly can.

So what if you could set your skepticism aside for a month and try listening for God, just like Moses did? Or Samuel, or David, or the disciples, or Paul, or many of Christendom's greatest saints did down through history? What if they understood something that you've missed? And, what if God was just waiting to break out of the box you've had him in to show you that he does still talk to people and wants to talk to you?

You may not be that far away from it even now. Chances are you already *do* hear the Lord's voice and just struggle to admit it. You may find yourself in the position of the woman who, when reflecting on her journey of faith said, "God used so many people to reach me over the years. Each time it *seemed* like God was saying, 'I'm still here.' It was obvious that running into these people was not a coincidence."

Well, if it was as obvious as she says, then why doesn't she just go ahead and give God credit for what he was saying through all those people? Why was she (and why are we all) so tentative in crediting God when he speaks?

Maybe God has been talking like that to a lot of us, but we're just not listening. We don't know how to listen. When he speaks, we say, "*It's almost as if he were speaking.*" We don't want to dishonor him by attributing words to him that he never uttered. But we never consider the disrespect of appearing deaf before the Almighty.

God has said in Scripture that he loves faith, that without faith you cannot please him [Heb.11:6]. He implores us over and over to seek him. Why not take a risk and begin searching for the still, small voice of God that may be speaking to you, even today?

The process

The fact is, God does speak to you and I, and he uses a variety of means to do so. As you begin listening to God and hearing

his voice, you may find that a question posed in the devotional will lead you to ask the Lord one of your own. That's great! The purpose of this devotional is not to keep you dependent on it but that, at some point, your conversation with God will begin to flow naturally. You may find that the Lord begins to guide your conversations more over time. Again, the goal is for you to grow in your personal relationship with God, not to complete every question.

Getting started

Begin in silence. Ask the Lord to speak to you by showing you your heart. For instance, what are your motives in going through this devotional? Write this initial question in your journal, and then listen for God's response. Ask for his protection.

Then, ask the Lord a question and wait for his reply in faith. Remember James 1:5-7: "If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God..." When you receive an impression of what the Lord may be saying, write it down. Use these questions as a conversation starter and then continue talking with him on your own – it's what he's been waiting for!

The listening prayer process

- When you are ready, quiet yourself and examine your heart. It's often good to begin by reading Scripture. Ask the Lord to speak to you through it.
- Ask the Lord to protect you in Jesus' name from deception.
- Ask him to speak clearly in a way that you can understand, and to confirm anything he shared with you in Scripture.
- Then write down your questions for prayer.

Then pause. This is where you wait and listen. The Lord has much to say to you. He may direct you to another passage of Scripture. He may share a tender word. Whatever you feel he may be saying to you, write it down.

Each day after the reading, questions are listed. You may want to “make them your own” by transferring them to your journal. Or, you may want to write in the brief space provided there.

We will talk more about the journaling process tomorrow. For now, let me share a simple and helpful method. In a quiet room with your Bible(s) and journal, take two different colored ink pens. Use the first ink color to record your own thoughts. You’ll use the second pen to record what you sense God is saying. The different colored inks clarify “who’s talking.” I use a black pen to record my prayers. If the Lord responds to a question I’ve asked, I journal this in blue ink.

This process of listening may feel awkward and, possibly, presumptuous. It contains the potential for mistaking ordinary thoughts for the voice of God. But the important thing is that you are giving God the opportunity to speak to you. Just as children must be taught to listen and to sit respectfully during adult conversation, so we must learn to stop our one-way monologues with our heavenly Father.

If you are like most people, you’ll find that stray thoughts of things-to-do-that-day flash on the screen of your mind. You may find it helpful to have a separate piece of paper on which to write TO DO list items. In fact, that’s often how I get direction for my day. But press on beyond your daily tasks to engage the Lord in listening prayer.

Questions to ask the Lord

Spend some time in prayer. Ask the Lord the questions below. Don’t worry about missing God – this is just practice in “tuning in” to his still, small voice. Rely on the Bible to help you sift any stray notions. Later your coach can help you look at this in light of Scripture. It may be uncomfortable at first but, as you wait, gradually that discomfort will be replaced by impressions of what he’s communicating to you. He is a gentle and good Shepherd; trust him to speak to you.

1. Are there ways in which I have offended you?
2. What can I do to keep from offending you in the future?
3. Is there anything you'd like to share with me?