

# Listening Prayer



"Incline your ear, and come to me," says God in Isaiah 55:3. "Listen, so that you may live."

Listening is the fundamental stance of the person of faith and a vital part of our faith journey. "I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear. But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth." (John 16:12–13).

There's more that Jesus wants to say to you, much more, and now that his Spirit resides in your heart, the conversation can continue. Many good people never hear God speak to them personally for the simple fact that they've never been told that he does. But he does—generously, intimately. "He who belong to God hears what God says" (John 8:47). Our ability to hear God's voice and discern his word to us grows over time.

Silence is the training ground for the art of listening. Engaging the silence may be one of the most important and productive things you can do for spiritual deepening. In the dizzying haste of our culture, silence and stillness have been equated with wasting time, doing nothing, being lazy. This is simply not true in the spiritual realm. Gradually, after deliberately choosing quiet times to be with Jesus, our heart begins to sharpen its perception of his presence. *The quiet of God begins to speak and direct us, and our heart becomes more finely tuned to the frequency that God uses to speak to us.*

Because we are compelled to accomplish as much as possible as quickly as possible, we skim over lives hoping somewhere along the way we will hear God. Most often we don't.

"Among the important lessons that the spiritual giants can teach us, and on which they have striking agreement, is that we are not likely to experience reality in prayer unless we practice a great deal of silent waiting. Far from prayer being a matter of words, it is often, at its best, freedom from words, since our own chatter can prevent our listening. Important as it may be for us to express our deepest desires to God, much as a little child expresses his desires to his earthly father, it is even more important to be truly receptive in order to learn what the Divine Father is trying to say to us. This is because, though we already know what we want, we do not know what God wants." (Elton Trueblood. *The New Man for Our Time*. New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1970, p. 73.)

Interestingly, the word "absurd" includes the Latin word *sardus*, which means "deaf." This would indicate that remaining deaf to the voice of God results in absurd living, a state in which life seems irrational and meaningless. Consider

how Jesus describes those who do not listen in Matt. 13:15, "For this people's heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them."

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In contrast, the word obedience includes the word *audire*, which means 'listening.' The obedient life is one in which we listen with acute awareness to the Holy Spirit. The New Testament word *upakouo*, which we translate as "obey," actually means to "hyper-listen." This kind of obedient listening often congers up the picture in my head of a desperate parent gripping a child's shoulder, looking them squarely in the eyes and saying, "Listen to me!" What that parent is really saying is, "Pay attention to me and do what I tell you!" Is this not what Jesus was saying when he said over and over, "He who has ears, let him hear"? The Bible is replete with examples of how not listening becomes a form of disobedience. (For examples see 2 Kings 17:14, 40; Neh. 9:29; Psm. 81:11, 13; Isa. 30:9; Ruth 2:8.) As we train our hearts to listen, and then act on what we hear, is the way in which we keep in the Holy Spirit's movement in our lives (Gal. 5:25). In this way, our obedience is deeply connected with the work already initiated and on-going in our lives by God.

Listening skills are developed. So how do we develop the skills needed to listen to God?

**The first skill we need to develop is: Showing up all the way.**

Showing up all the way with God is to listening intently with focused attention. It's incredible how much stuff we can "do for God" without bringing all of ourselves to the table and without any real interaction with Him at all. Too often we end of skimming through life unaware of the activity of God and we miss what God is up to in our lives and in the lives of those around us. Someone has said, "It means full attention; not just a haphazard one ear cocked to maybe catch a familiar sound."

**The second skill needed is: Listen to your stirrings.**

One of the best ways to cultivate a heart that hears the Spirit is to "walk" with any "stirrings" in your heart. Sometimes it can be a stirring in your conscious or a restlessness in your soul. Whatever sense of the Holy Spirit's movement you have, it's important you don't ignore it. When I sense even the slightest activity of the Holy Spirit, tell yourself, "Pay attention. This can take you something good."

**The final skill is: Practicing sustained listening.**

Richard Foster poignantly begins his classical book on the spiritual disciplines with this statement, "Superficiality is the curse of our age." Almost everything in our world inhibits our ability to sustain any kind of focus or attention. Because we

are compelled to accomplish as much as possible as quickly as possible, we skim over lives hoping somewhere along the way we will hear God. Most often we don't. We are so consumed with the goings-on around us there is little or no practice or opportunity for sustained listening. God continues to speak long after we've gotten up from our devotional place or closed our Bible. The ability to listen and hear God's voice grows over time with practice, yet too often we grow weary with the invitation to linger in quietness or get impatient with the discipline it takes to listen deeply.

For many of us, we try to hear God's voice on the run and then always wondered why he doesn't speak. Once we start practicing attentive listening we may be amazed how much God has to say! There are just no shortcuts. Listening will take time. Our busy schedules will scream that we need to simply "get on with it" to the task at hands. But as Gordon Smith, in "On the Way", points out, "It is inconceivable to think that God would give us so much to do that we can no longer spend extended time with Him. Listening doesn't detract from our service; it empowers it." (Thomas, Gary L., *Sacred Parenting*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004, p. 64)

#### **Practice:**

- 1. Decide ahead of time a time and place where you can spend uninterrupted time with God.**
- 2. Begin with a modest goal**, especially if listening prayer is new to you. Maybe start with ten minutes.
- 3. Start with a simple prayer that expresses your desire to hear from God**, like "Here I am, Lord." Resist trying to fill the silence with words. Stay in a place of listening.
- 4. Know that there will be distractions...**from without and from within. Stay with it. Know that God is greater than your own heart and even when your time is filled with anxiousness, doubt, and frustration, know that just showing up pleases him.
- 5. Commit yourself to follow through what you hear.** Be willing to surrender to the obedience that is called for.