

How to Listen To God

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King David discovered the power of inquiring and listening at an early age. Through 1 and 2 Samuel, he inquires of the Lord and waits for an answer. Many of his questions concern upcoming battles. Will the Israelites win? How should they attack? David knew he could never listen to the Lord too much.

A brief but significant moment in David's life is tucked away in 1 Samuel 23, when he is informed that the Philistines are fighting Keilah and looting the land. The news couldn't have come at a worse time. David and a militia of about 600 men are on the run from King Saul, who is paranoid that the young, popular David is going to seize his throne. With a target on their backs, David and his men move from place to place, staying a half step ahead of the crazed king. The news of Keilah reads like a side note, and David could have dismissed the distress call, knowing he had enough battles to fight already. At the other extreme, he could have charged immediately into battle, convinced he needed to defend everyone attacked by the Philistines. Instead, David inquires of the Lord and waits for His response before making a decision. God instructs him to attack the Philistines and save Keilah.

Like David, we face countless needs and opportunities in life. With each one, we are invited to inquire of God and listen for His response.

Hearing God's voice requires a listening heart. Mastering the art of listening is one of my greatest challenges. As a wordsmith, I've found myself developing a terrible habit: I tend to jump in and finish people's sentences or thoughts. I've been disciplining myself to remain silent. As I'm refining this area in my life, I've wondered how often I do this to God. How often do I cut God off, assuming I already know what is going to be said? Do I try to put words into God's mouth?

The art of listening for God invites me into a realm I find uncomfortable: silence. I must quiet my heart and embrace the stillness that allows me to truly know that He is God. While this may sound counterintuitive, silence is a key to satisfying hunger for God. When you think about feeding your appetite, you might have visions of rushing up to a dining room table filled with savory chicken and side dishes that smell like Thanksgiving. But sometimes rushing the meal is the worst thing we can do. God wants to feed us, and we must learn to sit quietly as he serves a banquet for our souls.

Silence asks me to close my mouth in order to open my heart. The first few moments of silence are the hardest, as I become painfully aware of the hum of the refrigerator, the muffled clang of the dryer. In the stillness, a wave of chores left undone crashes over me. The dishwasher needs emptying. I count 17 pieces of lint on the carpet. When was the last time I vacuumed? I fight back the distraction with a prayer: Jesus, help me to focus wholly on You and hear from You. I say His name a few times. My mind, body and spirit embrace the silence as a gift. As my listening sharpens, I realize that silence has its own beautiful rhythm. In this place, I'll ask God, "What's on Your heart?" and wait.

Sometimes I hear nothing at all, but at other times I'll begin thinking of someone long forgotten. Or I'll remember the need of a particular friend. Whether my mind drifts to politics or social justice issues, I offer up prayers to God and pepper Him with questions. Why does this matter to You?

What's Your perspective? How can I serve You? At times, I'll feel compelled to pray, serve or give. Other times, I'll simply sit in the silence with a renewed awareness of what's important to God.

These moments have taught me that God is passionate about the poor, He aches for justice and He longs for relationship. I've learned about the tenderness of God, discovered new depths of divine love and treasured the sweet moments of simply being with Him.

Listening forces me to learn patience. Nowhere in the Bible does God commit to running on our schedule or fitting into our time frame, though I wish it were that easy! God answers some prayers in the moment, but on others He waits. Waiting isn't easy and doesn't always deliver the answer we desire. Learning to hear, recognize and discern the ways in which God speaks isn't snappy. But in the waiting time, God works within us in ways that are unrecognizable at first but over time reveal their priceless worth.