

Listening to God in Prayer

When we think about prayer, listening isn't generally the first thing that comes to mind. But prayer is communion with God—and that requires that we listen to what's on God's heart in addition to expressing what's on our own. That isn't something that comes naturally to most of us. How can we cultivate our listening skills so that we can hear His voice?

I used to think, *if only God would speak more clearly, I would follow Him more closely*. I have often complained that His still, small voice seemed too quiet. But at unexpected times—when I became still—I have heard Him, longing to be heard and waiting for my ears to be open and attentive.

God desires to communicate with His people, even more than we desire to communicate with Him! He is still the same God He has always been and He continues to speak to us. I have learned to hear His voice through *listening* prayer—what some call contemplative prayer.

Contemplative prayer is thoughtful, reflective prayer. How can we, in our world of incessant noise and activity, incorporate it into our daily lives? It requires effort, active listening, focused attention, and confident expectation that God will speak.

Throughout the Psalms, David models someone who waits on God in this way: “My soul waits in silence for God only” (Psalm 62:1 NASB); “My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet with God?” (Psalm 42:2).

Contemplative prayer is being with God, empty-handed, waiting attentively for whatever He wants to say. It is the discipline of being still and knowing that He is God (Psalm 46:10).

Why don't most of us practice this discipline? Why is simply sitting at His feet with no agenda so difficult—even frightening? Perhaps it is because we are afraid of what we might hear. When we quietly wait on God, the Holy Spirit often speaks penetrating words—words of *conviction*, words of *love*, or *no words* at all.

With *words of conviction*, God reveals actions or attitudes we need to confess to Him—and sometimes others—and directs us to seek reconciliation.

On many occasions, as I take time to listen to God, the Holy Spirit reminds me of recent conversations or comments that were not edifying. Only by listening to the Spirit's conviction can I recognize my sin and hear Him direct me to seek forgiveness from my friend.

Surprisingly, I often find myself just as reluctant to hear His *words of love*. Many of us don't wait in His presence long enough to let Him love us. We are quick to voice our concerns, seek His guidance, and request His blessing. It must grieve our Father's heart that we come to Him only in want of something rather than coming simply because we enjoy being in His presence.

Perhaps another reason we don't practice contemplative prayer is we fear hearing no words *at all*. We are so afraid of wasting time we become unable to enjoy the delight of simply being with Him. And yet, God delights for us to sit at His feet and enjoy being with Him.

Putting It Into Practice

How can we begin? The things I'm suggesting are not formulas. As you consider them, ask God to show you additional ways to incorporate this discipline into your life.

Meditate on Scripture: After studying Scripture, choose one verse, phrase, or word upon which to meditate. Ponder it and slowly repeat it. Ask the Lord what He wants to say to you (Psalm 119:78).

Choose a verse such as, "The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not be in want" (Psalm 23:1). Sometimes such a familiar verse loses its meaning. Meditating on it and asking questions reveals what we may be overlooking.

Sing and pray the Psalms: "Sing praise to the Lord" (Psalm 68:32). After reading a psalm, begin to sing it to a tune you know or create as you go along. I find that singing a psalm helps me ponder it afresh by increasing my involvement with what I'm reading.

Journal in prayer: Write your prayers to God and wait for His response. Writing helps us stay focused and probe our thoughts and heart more deeply. Write something you want to tell God (a statement, rather than a question, about something happening in your life). Then listen and ask the Holy Spirit to provide wisdom and understanding to what you are praying out of His Word.

Listen to God speak through His creation: "The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of His hands" (Psalm 19:1). When I sit on a beach, He reminds me that His love for me is constant. Running my fingers through the sand, I remember David's words, "How precious to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them! Were I to count them, they would outnumber the grains of sand" (Psalm 139:17,18).

Be still before Him: "The Lord is good to those who wait for Him, to the person who seeks Him. It is good that he waits silently . . . Let him sit alone and be silent" (Lamentations 3:25,26,29 NASB). In this posture of stillness, we can more keenly hear Him speak. We honor God by expressing our willingness to be still in His presence.

Developing a discipline takes perseverance. Our flesh does not like to be trained and controlled. We will find every reason not to practice contemplative prayer: things must be done, phone calls must be made, worries crowd our thoughts. As we sit in silence, we will itch and squirm, our backs will ache, and our stomachs will grumble. But as we sit with Him in faith and obedience, He will honor our desire to know and hear Him.

Adapted from The Listening Side of Prayer by Stacy Padrick,