

LIFE with Jesus in Worship

Listening to God

“Many voices ask for our attention. There is a voice that says, ‘Prove that you are a good person.’ Another voice says, ‘You’d better be ashamed of yourself.’ There also is a voice that says, ‘Nobody really cares about you,’ and one that says, ‘Be sure to become successful, popular, and powerful.’ But underneath all these often very noisy voices is a still, small voice that says, ‘You are my Beloved, my favor rests on you.’ That’s the voice we need most of all to hear. To hear that voice, however, requires special effort; it requires solitude, silence, and a strong determination to listen. That’s what prayer is. It is listening to the voice that calls us ‘my Beloved’.”

– Henri Nouwen

INTRODUCTION

Do you ever wonder what it was like for Jesus to hear God’s voice?

What about you? Do you wonder if God speaks to you today?

Jesus Listens

Long before Jesus walked among us, Isaiah knew he would be a man who *listens* to God. Speaking for Jesus, he wrote, “Morning by morning he awakens; he awakens my ear to hear as those who are taught. The Lord God has opened my ear, and I was not rebellious,” (Isaiah 50:4-6). Jesus affirms this saying, “By myself I can do nothing; I judge only as I *hear*,” (John 5:30). And at two critical moments in Jesus’ life the gospels give us a glimpse into Jesus hearing from his Father.

At Jesus’ baptism the heavens open, the Spirit comes down like a dove, and the Father says, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased,” (Matthew 3:17). Then several years later, before Jesus sets out for Jerusalem where he knows he will face crucifixion, he again hears his Father saying, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him,” (Matthew 17:5).

Imagine for moment what it would be like to hear such words from God? What does this stir in you?

In these verses we see that the voice of his Father bestows upon Jesus his identity, secures him in love, and guides his decision making.

Jesus’ Followers Listen to God

Because we follow Jesus and the Father has adopted us as his children, he invites us to hear his voice as well. Jesus says his followers will have the joy of learning to know his voice. “My sheep hear my voice,” he promises, (Jn 10:27). We too are meant to find our identity grounded in him, grow in knowing his love for us, and find guidance—all through God’s words to us.

God speaks to us in many ways, but most often through four means: the Scriptures, our life circumstances, our fellow believers, and what is known as the “gentle whisper.”

The question is, are we listening?

In this practice, we will explore these four spheres of communication with God. We'll start with some explanation of each sphere and consider some common missteps in listening to God. Then the suggested practices will lead us step by step to engage each sphere of listening to God.

God's Voice in the Scriptures

When we open the Bible, we hold God's living words in our hands. Hebrews says this word is "alive and active," (Hebrews 4:12). And Paul says the breath of God forms the words: "All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness," (2 Timothy 3:16).

"The (written) Word is the wire along which the voice of God will certainly come to you if the heart is hushed and the attention fixed," says Frederick B. Meyer.

So when we think of listening to God, we must first adopt a humble, open-hearted, open-eared approach to hearing God speak to us through his word. This involves regular times of quiet with the Scriptures, and a heart-posture that says, as Mary does, "I am the servant of the Lord; may it be to me according to your word," (Luke 1:38).

If we make this our regular habit, we will occasionally notice certain verses stand out or shimmer before our minds. We will have a sense that those specific words are God's personal words to us on a given day. We will know that God has spoken to us.

Immersing ourselves regularly in God's words will also help us grow to know him—what he cares about, how he views things, how he desires to see life ordered, what he wants from us. In this way, he will communicate with us as well. We will begin to feel the insistence of the Holy Spirit, gently pressing us to order our lives according to God's righteousness and goodness and to pray for his kingdom to come in the world around us. As we obey this voice, we will be placing ourselves in a position to hear God's speak even more.

God's Voice in our Circumstances

Sometimes we make the mistake of thinking the voice of God will come only through supernatural experiences. Truthfully, he more commonly speaks to us in natural ways through the everyday circumstances of the life he creates and sustains.

Frederick Buechner puts it this way: "Listen to your life. See it for the fathomless mystery it is. In the boredom and pain of it, no less than in the excitement and gladness; touch, taste, smell your way to the holy and hidden heart of it, because in the last analysis all moments are key moments, and life itself is grace."

We can discern God speaking through our relationships and through creation. The love of someone else, just when we need it, might speak to us of his love for us. The pain we feel when we hurt someone else may be the way he speaks to us about a sin pattern he wants to address. The beauty of the sunrise or of flowers blooming in our yard might speak to us of his glory and goodness. "The heavens proclaim the glory of God. The skies display his craftsmanship. Day after day they continue to speak; night after night they make him known," (Psalms 19:1-2) says the psalmist. He also may speak by providing or denying certain opportunities.

When we want to hear God, it's important to pay attention to what is happening in our life.

God's Voice through Fellow Believers

The presence of Christ on earth today is his church, his body, and he speaks to us through one another. This happens through teaching, preaching, or simply speaking with friends—all the contexts where we share with one another the insights we receive as we spend time with him in his word. “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly,” Paul encourages, “teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God,” (Colossians 3:16).

When we want to hear God it’s important to pay attention to what we hear from those around us.

The “Gentle Whisper”

Elijah experienced God speaking to him in a “still, small voice,” or a “low whisper,” (1 Kings 19:12). And down through the ages, God has continued to speak to his children this way, inviting us to draw courage, strength, and joy from his voice of love, the love that formed us, sustains us, and calls us home. The invitation of the Christian life is for us to be beloved children of God, living in continual communion and conversation with him.

Brother Lawrence, a monk from the fifteenth century, expresses joy in this life: “There is not in the world a kind of life more sweet and delightful than that of a continual conversation with God,” he says.

So God created us to live in continual communication with him and this the life that gives us the most joy. Jesus promised we would hear him. But how do we discern God’s voice? How do we sort out his words to us from the cacophony of noise around and within us?

It helps to know that God’s voice most often comes to us naturally and gently, through our own thoughts. This means God’s voice ordinarily sounds like our own voice, with a different tone and effect. We can discern between his voice and ours by the impact of the words we hear.

Our voice might condemn, nag, frighten, tempt, or argue with us in our minds. Satan too can speak to us in this way. These voices, of our flesh or of our enemy, will often have the effect of unsettling or agitating us.

The voice of God speaking in our hearts and minds has a different effect. As Jan Johnson puts it, “One way to discern whether we’re hearing God’s voice is by listening to the tone of it. We ask ourselves, does the spirit and quality of that voice sound like my normal self-talk, or is it a little surprising and just right?” A little surprising—we would not have had this thought normally or on our own. And just right—it has a settling effect.

God’s voice is loving, calm, non-shaming, and self-authenticating. James’ description of God’s wisdom is helpful here: “The wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial, and sincere,” James 3:17. God’s voice, full of his wisdom, resonates with these life-giving qualities. His voice does not bully us or argue with us, but rather *allures* and *arrests* us.

If we doubt whether the thought comes from God, we can weight it according to these standards. Is it a little surprising? Self-authenticating? Loving? Quiet but firm? Does it awaken something good within us? Is it consistent with Scripture? Does it settle rather than agitate us? Does our trusted community affirm what we are hearing? If the answer to all these questions is yes and we still doubt, we can remember and take heart that God’s voice is often still, small, and gentle. This can help us avoid the temptation to explain the words or perceptions away and instead thankfully treasure them as the normal, life-giving way of God with his people.

Common Missteps in Listening to God

- “Hearing” something that contradicts Scripture.

We can be sure that we are not hearing from God if what we hear cuts against the grain of the Scriptures or opposes them in any way. If we are unsure, it is good to run what we think we are hearing by people who are grounded in God's word.

- Failing to submit what we believe we hear to our community for discernment.

We can also be tempted to “run with” what we think we hear without inviting our trusted community to discern with us. Here we risk taking a tangent suggested by the desires of our flesh. Our close friends in the faith can help us discern if what we sense is truly God or simply a desire consistent with temptations we have faced in the past.

- Discounting the voice of God as simply our own thoughts.

The gentle whisper of God, coming to us through the medium of the thoughts in our minds can be so soft or kind that we can easily dismiss it. Learning to listen and to discern takes slowing down, carefully weighing what we think we heard, attending to the tone and effect, and finally trusting that what we have heard is from God.

- The assumption that hearing from God means I don't have to make any decisions or that I will always be safe.

Sometimes we want to hear from God to avoid making a “wrong” decision. Our efforts at discernment in this case can be less about cooperating with God to advance his beautiful kingdom and more about protecting ourselves from suffering or disappointment.¹ But Jesus says that we are his *friends*. This means sometimes he happily lets *us* choose, promising to be with us whatever we decide.

- The assumption that God will always speak when I'd like him to speak to me.

Sometimes we hear God clearly, sometimes faintly, and sometimes not at all. This is true for everyone. We must not interpret God's silence as his absence or as a judgment against ourselves. If we can't hear from God, he might have something good for us in the waiting, or we might need to involve trusted friends to help us.

THE PRACTICE

Listening to God in the Scriptures

A Psalm and a Gospel Passage Each Day

First, we can learn to listen to God speaking to us through the scriptures. There are many ways to do this, but they all involve habits of regular reading and meditating upon God's words. If you don't have rhythms with the Bible, it's okay—you can start now!

Choose a time each day when you can be quiet and alone for at least ten or fifteen minutes. Start by prayerfully reading a psalm—you can do one per day or just a portion of one. As you read the passage,

¹ “We may insist on having God tell us what to do because we live in fear or are obsessed with *being right* as a strategy for *being safe*. But we may also do it because we do not really have a hearty faith in his gracious goodwill toward us,” Dallas Willard, *Hearing God*.

several times, notice if any words or phrases stand out to you. Spend some time turning them into prayer—are they giving voice to your heart? Or are they speaking something to you about God? Talk to him about this.

Next, read a small portion of one of the gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John. Try to put yourself in the scene. What do you learn about Jesus? About other people? About yourself? Do you sense anything God wants you to know? Make a few notes in your journal if that is helpful to you and turn your experience with this passage into prayer.

Lectio Divina

Christians for centuries have practiced *Lectio Divina* (Divine Reading) as one way to listen to God speak to us through the scriptures. You can find out more about this practice at <https://greenwoodcc.com/lectio-divina/>

Listening to God through our Life

Examen

The practice of *examen* helps us to listen for God speaking to us through our lives. You can find out more about this practice at <https://greenwoodcc.com/examen/>

Paying Attention

Listening to God in your life can be as simple as asking God a question and then paying attention as you go through your day. Does his answer come through an opportunity he provides? A door he closes? A person who says something unexpected? Something you read or hear?

Listening to God through Our Fellow Believers

Maybe you have had the experience of listening to a sermon and thinking, “That message was for me!” Or maybe you’ve been wrestling with something only to find that a friend brings up something pertinent to your musings. If so, you have heard God speak through your fellow believers.

The practice of listening to God this way is to simply *pay attention and notice what you notice*. Did something you just read seem to leap off the page at you? Did that comment pierce your heart? Did you sense conviction when that person spoke? Do you hear an invitation from God as someone talks about their ministry or the way they relate to their family? Did someone give you the word of encouragement you needed at just the right moment?

When you notice yourself noticing something like this, slow down. Ponder what God might be saying to you. Perhaps make a note of it in your phone or journal to consider another time. God lives in those around you, and you can expect to hear from him through them.

Listening to God’s Still, Small Voice

To hear God speaking in our hearts we need to slow down and make space for quietness. Please try slowing your breathing, sitting quietly, and reminding yourself that God is as near to you as your breath. Simply acknowledge and welcome his closeness and attempt to still yourself to be aware of his presence.

Expressions of gratitude or praises from the Scriptures can help you become ready to hear from him. Then simply ask him a question or ask him if he has something he'd like to say to you.

Please then listen in the stillness of your heart for anything that comes to mind—a word, a phrase, a scripture verse, a picture, an impression. Then notice the effect of this communication upon you; does it settle you or agitate you?

If nothing comes to mind, that's okay too. You can go about your day; but try to be attentive because the answer might come when you are not expecting it. Or as someone once described it, "Eventually I would simply find the answer inside myself."

Lastly, if you heard the Lord instructing you to do something, obey him! To listen and to obey are one and the same from a biblical point of view.

HELPFUL VERSES

"My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me." John 10:27

"Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer;
you shall cry for help, and he will say, "Here I am."
The Lord will guide you continually. Isaiah 58:9, 11

"He who has ears to hear, let him hear." Matthew 11:15

"He wakens me morning by morning, wakens my ear to listen like one being instructed." Isaiah 50:4

"Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening." 1 Samuel 3:9

"I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." Luke 1:38

INTERESTING QUOTES

"As you build relationship with God, you get to know his voice." – Pete Greig

"Developing an ear that recognizes God's voice and that listens to your life opens up the possibility of hearing from God through anyone or anything. Practice listening to God and you will develop a heart tuned to the pitch and timbre of God's word to you." – Adele Calhoun

"There is not in the world a kind of life more sweet and delightful than that of a continual conversation with God. Those only can comprehend it who practice and experience it." – Brother Lawrence

"The (written) Word is the wire along which the voice of God will certainly come to you if the heart is hushed and the attention fixed." – Frederick B. Meyer

"It cannot be stressed too much that the permanent address at which the word of God may be found is the Bible." – Dallas Willard

“The voice of God speaking in our souls also bears within itself a characteristic *spirit*. It is a spirit of exalted peacefulness and confidence, of joy, of sweet reasonableness and of goodwill. His voice is not the voice of a bully.” – Dallas Willard

“One way to discern whether we’re hearing God’s voice is by listening to the tone of it. We ask ourselves, does the spirit and quality of that voice sound like my normal self-talk, or is it a little surprising and just right?” – Jan Johnson

“God’s spiritual invasions into human life seem, by their very gentleness, to invite us to explain them away.” – Dallas Willard