

Listening Prayer - an Introduction

If you are like I was much of my life, most of your prayer may seem more like "listing" prayer than listening prayer, giving God your daily list of needs, requests, and sometimes "thank - yous" with a little praise sprinkled in. These are all valid and important parts of prayer and our relationship with God. But, since it is a relationship, our communication with God should include all the elements of communication that any important relationship does. Listening is one of these elements. In life with our earthly loved ones, it is very important. So, why not with God?

For me, listening prayer was not something I read about in a book or heard about in a class and tried until I got it. It really seemed to be born of my hard-headedness. In other words, God had to get loud to get my attention. I liked to call this experience the almighty foot of God kicking me in the right direction. I have a friend who seems a much more obedient follower of Christ than I've ever thought myself to be. When I would share these early experiences of hearing God with him, he would tell me that he wished he could know or hear when God was speaking to him. Back then, I would tell him, "You're so obedient and in God's will, God doesn't have to speak to you. He has to save his voice to keep people like me in line."

I have learned a lot since that time and I don't recommend emulating my disobedience or straying as a way to hear from God. There are much simpler paths. I think the gift from those earlier days is an undeniable knowing that there is a God and this God wants to be with us, spend time with us, and yes, speak to us. And, God has much more to say to us than, "Hey! Get your act together!" To tell the truth, God rarely uses that tone with me, even when I feel I deserve it.

I discovered listening prayer, as it is for me now, on the corner of my couch, in my living room, early one morning before work. I was using a journal, a bible, and the *Jesus Calling* book. But, I was tired of digging through scripture, tired of reading, and I had just run out of words. At that point, something inside let me know that I had been having a one sided relationship and the reason it felt like I was working so hard at it was because I was working so hard at it. I'd never just stopped and shut up. But then, I did. I just stopped, slowed and deepened my breathing, let myself relax, and listened. At that moment, I had a deep sense of God's presence and a loving whisper, so gentle, and so simple. As I sat there, I didn't want to get up. And as I listened, the words were few, but the message was clear. "You are loved, you are not alone, and I am here." Honestly, most of the time that's about all I need to hear when I am sitting with God. Since that day, noticeable encounters with God have been much more frequent and much more natural. Now, I don't have to go on a retreat* or go astray, to hear God's voice and know God's presence, and neither do you.

This first experience of listening prayer taught me that taking time to be with God and hear from God doesn't have to be complicated or a lot of work, it just requires us to take the time to stop and just be. Though I'm not a fan of living by lists, here is a way to help you remember some of what's involved when listening prayer happens: Believe, Be still, Be silent, Be aware, Be present, Be with, and Be loved.

Believe - Fortunately or unfortunately, God has made it impossible for me not to believe God is real and ever present. This is because God is constantly turning up in my life. This may not be so for you. If that

is where you find yourself, be patient with yourself, your own experience, and your understanding. Also, be patient with God. You might begin your journey by asking God to help you know of God's existence.

Be still - Find a place, time, and position, where you can just stop and be still. Once in the right spot, I find that slowing and deepening my breath helps to still me. The right spot used to be on the corner of my couch early in the morning, when I could be alone with God, uninterrupted. Since my wife rearranged the furniture, my old place doesn't work anymore. Now there is a chair next to a piano bench in the den where I like to go to.

Be silent - This doesn't mean, just to pray silently. This means turning off your own words. For me, it meant letting go of the notion that I was required to keep the conversation going. Sometimes before I can reach this point, I find that I need to journal or just write my thoughts, rambling or not, to help me get all of my stuff out. Then, just stop.

Be aware and be present - Since I know God is always present, I know it is usually something in me that keeps me from experiencing and knowing this. We've become expert at being "not aware" of and "not present" to, even people in the same room with us. This mindset can also carry into our time with God. One of my regular prayers is, "God, make me aware of your presence and help me be present to you."

Be with and be loved - I am an introvert. So, I'm good at being alone. But, I need to spend time being with those I love and those who love me. When I am with them, and we are distraction free, I find I like to drink in deep, the goodness and essence that these people bring into the space we share. The same is true in being with God. Allowing yourself just to sit with God and experience God's love for you, is in itself a beautiful part of most prayer, and something I think we are all built longing for. In listening prayer, being with and being loved, can bring clarity to what we may hear. Without this, I think it is easy to confuse other voices or our interpretations of life events for God's true voice.

Now that I've given you a bit of a structure for listening prayer, it's time to tear it all down. What I just shared may help you understand some of what happens or what is involved when we listen to and hear God speaking, but God's interactions with us aren't confined to designated times and places. I've found myself practicing listening prayer in my office and in meetings at my job, when I'm walking my dog, riding my bike, or running, and in my back yard under a tree.

Listening prayer is also something I experience in spiritual direction sessions as both directee and director. In fact, a spiritual direction session or a group spiritual direction session will often feel like a joint listening prayer session. These times when two or more are gathered in God's name, God's presence and voice are regularly made known and give clarification or direction on next steps.

I don't want to give the impression that spiritual direction or listening prayer brings immediate change to situations or makes bad times suddenly wonderful. What it does offer us, is the chance and the encouraging companionship to be different in the situations and places we find ourselves; to embrace all the parts of the abundant life we are in, rather than make failed attempts at blocking out, numbing, or covering up what we find painful or unpleasant.

In as many ways as we are each unique, there are also many ways of going about listening prayer as you seek to spend time in God's presence and hearing God's voice. It is my hope that this short treatment of the subject will introduce you to the possibility that prayer can be different and also give you some ideas of how you might introduce this gift of presence into your own relationship with God.

May you hear God's voice and know God's love,

Scott

* Though retreat does not have to be the only time we experience God's presence, taking time away for an extended period (1 day or longer) of prayer and focus on your relationship with God can be an important part of growing and maintaining your relationship with God. I try for a minimum of two retreats per year.

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