

Summary

God seeks a relationship with us, heard by faith. Learn to listen through prayer, scripture, stillness, and discernment, avoiding distractions and testing perceived messages against biblical truth.

Call to Worship

Shout for joy to the Lord, all the earth. Serve the Lord with gladness; come before him with joyful songs. Know that the Lord is God. It is he who made us, and we are his; we are the sheep of his pasture. (Ps 100:1-3)

Worship in song

Sing hymns and/or worship songs of your choice.

Reading from the Psalms

- Psalm 73:13-26

Prayer of confession

Loving Father,

In the safety of your love, we confess that we call you Lord but have not let you be Lord. But now Lord, put us to grand things or humble things, whatever is to your glory.

We call you Lord but shrink from the cost of discipleship. But now Lord, put us to hardship or times of blessing, whatever is to your glory.

We call you Lord but sometimes we doubt. But now Lord, put us to times of perseverance in which we see your glory.

We call you Lord but seek our own high status. But now Lord, put us to your will and with who you will for your glory.

We call you Lord but do not seek your counsel. But now Lord, put us to the quest of learning, that we might understand your glory.

We call you Lord but want so much for ourselves. But now Lord, put us with plenty, put us with nothing, whatever is to your glory

We pray this prayer knowing we cannot live it without your love and empowering presence in our lives. Amen

Assurance of forgiveness

If you, O Lord, kept a record of sins, O Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness. (Ps 130:3-4).

Prayer of thanksgiving

Loving Father,

Forgive us your children, for:

- our lack of confidence in you,
- our lack of hope in your future,
- our lack of trust in your mercy,
- our lack of certainty in your will for us.

Forgive us your church, for:

- our wealth among the poor,
- our indifference among the oppressed,
- our lack of vision amongst the despairing,
- our silence amongst those who cry for hope.

Forgive us, the bride of Christ, for:

- our ignorance of Christ's word,
- our doubt over who Christ is,
- our fear of following Christ,
- our rejection of Christ's love.

This day, we declare to the world that:

- we are your children,
- we are your church,
- we are the bride of Christ.

We commit ourselves to you and rejoice in you. Amen.

The Bible Reading

- John 6:41-50

The Message: LEARN TO LISTEN TO GOD

God is about relationships, specifically, having a relationship with us. But there is a quandary. God can't be so obvious as to compel faith... and yet he still needs to relate to us. So, God's answer is this: God's voice can be heard, but can only be heard by faith, i.e. with the simple trusting faith a child has for its father. God knows that we may not always be able to hear his truth in prayer, or hear it accurately, so he has also given us his written words so that we will never be without his guiding principles.

What is perfectly clear in scripture is that God wants us, his people, to develop the skills of listening to him.

When describing his ministry as being the good shepherd to his people, Jesus said something very significant. He said that *“My sheep listen to my voice”* (Jn 10:27). True Christians hunger to hear the voice of Jesus.

“Learn To Listen To God”

Throughout the Old Testament, God's complaint about his people was that they did not seek him. (Is 9:13; 31:1) In Jeremiah, God asks, *Who is he who will devote himself to be close to me?* (Jer 30:21).

Samuel

In 1 Samuel 3:1-14 we read the account of young Samuel's first exposure to the voice of God. The Lord called to him, and twice Samuel mistook God's voice for that of the priest Eli, his mentor. The Bible says, *“Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord: The word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him”* (v 7). Eli had to teach him to recognise the voice of God calling to him and to respond by saying, *“Speak Lord, your servant is listening”* (1 Sam 3:9).

So develop the inner sensitivity to listening to God. Learn to recognise the voice of God. It takes time and experience.

Learn to listen

From John's biography of Jesus, from John Jn 6:41-50.

At this the Jews began to grumble about him because he said, "I am the bread that came down from heaven." They said, "Is this not Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, 'I came down from heaven'?"

"Stop grumbling among yourselves," Jesus answered. "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him, and I will raise him up at the last day. It is written in the Prophets: 'They will all be taught by God.' Everyone who listens to the Father and learns from him comes to me. No one has seen the Father except the one who is from God; only he has seen the Father. I tell you the truth, he who believes has everlasting life. I am the bread of life. Your forefathers ate the manna in the desert, yet they died. But here is the bread that comes down from heaven, which a man may eat and not die.

You cannot hear the Father if you will not hear the Son. You will not recognise the voice of the Father if you fail to recognise the identity of Jesus.

Jesus represents the Father, and the Father represents Jesus. As Jesus explained:

I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you (Jn 17:20)

or as Jesus famously said: *“He who has seen me has seen the Father”* (Jn 14:9).

So you have this wonderful *perichoresis*, this ‘mutual indwelling’ of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Note: It was God the Father who revealed the true identity of Jesus to Peter (Mt 16:17).

So, what do we learn from this? We learn to be available for God to speak to.

Let's look at what this means.

Avoid hurry sickness

It means avoiding hurry sickness.

“Learn To Listen To God”

In the story of Mary and Martha in Luke, chapter 10, Martha was running about trying to organise good Jewish hospitality for Jesus and his disciples, whilst Mary “*sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said*” (Lk 10:39). Jesus commended Mary for her choice. This teaches us to not be so busy ‘doing’ that we fail to listen to Jesus.

Jesus had a very busy schedule but he made it a practice to put a priority on going to desolate places alone to pray very early in the morning (Mk 1:35; Lk 5:16).

Be still

The second discipline we need to develop if we are to be available for God to speak to is to have developed the art of ‘being still’, i.e. being in a suitable private place with God... without distractions, e.g. behind closed doors, alone (Mt 6:6). It is significant that we read of Jesus going out to a hill or mountain to pray (Lk 6:12; 9:28); and also to the Garden of Gethsemane – away from other people (Mt 26:36).

Once we have found a place without distractions, what do we do?

Without being legalistic, there are usually two components of a daily quiet time with God:

- prayer and
- meditation on God’s Word, the Bible.

Just be careful not to substitute activity (doing programs) for waiting on God and communing with God in intense inner communion.

Get the work/prayer/play balance right

When Elijah was running away from his ministry into the desert, burnt out and feeling sorry for himself, God told him to stand on Mt Sinai where God promised to be with him. So Elijah returned to the mountain where God had first given his law to Moses and his people... in order to hear God again. He waited.

At first there was a mighty wind, (so great that it broke the rocks), then an earthquake, which was followed by a fire. However, none of these were the presence of God, they simply heralded the coming of God's presence. The presence of God followed and is described as being a “gentle whisper” (1 Kings 19:11-13). So:

- Stand in the presence of God ...and learn to hear the whisper
- God responds to prayers of desperation.
Prayer is the language in which the heart asks God to hear it, and to take it lovingly to His own heart. (Karl Rahner)¹
- You need to be in an attitude of expectation, ready to hear the gentle thoughts that come winging clearly into your mind from God.

The power of worshipping and fasting

In the book of Acts, we read: *Whilst they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them”* (Acts 13:2). This teaches us to be ready for God to speak during times of worshipping and fasting. Community worship and fasting is powerful.

¹ Karl Rahner was a 20th century, Roman Catholic, German theologian.

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A model prayer

It can be helpful to model your prayer on the Lord's Prayer, as it has a good balance of praise, confession and petition (Mt 6:9-13).

Use each of its sections as successive subjects about which to pray and meditate.

"Our father" - Ponder your relationship with God

"Hallowed be your name" - Praise and worship God.

"Your kingdom come" - Be open to what God wants.

"Your will be done" - Bend your will to fit God's will.

"Give us this day" - Ask for what is needed

"Forgive us...as we forgive"- Examine yourself before God.

Confess and forgive. (Unless we forgive, we cannot receive God's forgiveness.)

"Lead us not into temptation"- Ask God to guide you into the right decisions and away from temptations.

"Deliver us from evil" - Pray for protection against Satan.

How do you discern the voice of God?

How do you discern the voice of God from:

- delusions of the mind?
- wishful thinking?
- idle fancies of the mind?

The false prophets couldn't:

I have heard what the prophets say who prophesy lies in my name. They say, 'I had a dream! I had a dream!' How long will this continue in the hearts of these lying prophets, who prophesy the delusions of their own minds? They think the dreams they tell one another will make my people forget my name, just as their fathers forgot my name through Baal worship. Let the prophet who has a dream tell his dream, but let the one who has my word speak it faithfully. For what has straw to do with grain?" declares the LORD. "Is not my word like fire," declares the LORD, "and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces? (Jer 23:25-29)

The main way you can tell if it is the word of God is if it is true and powerful (like a fire) and changes things (breaks the hard things [rocks] to pieces).

It is important that we test what we believe to be God's prophetic voice to us. But note: this means checking your thinking with people who are holy, wise and discerning. Here are some things to check:

1) Is the prophecy compatible with the essential truth of God's word? (Deut 13:1-4; 18:20)
Is it consistent with the truth of Jesus? (1 Jn 4:1-3; Rev 19:10).

2) Is it ethically sound?

3) Does the prophet show evidence of:

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- a wholesome personal intimacy with God? (Prophecy follows as a result of the prophet standing in the council of the Lord: see: Jer 23:22)
- psychiatric stability?
- having a good moral character?
- displaying the fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22-23; Mt 7:15-20)

4) Is the prophecy relevant for people and does it build people up? This is important as some alleged prophecies can simply be the subconscious pushing personal issues and difficulties onto the rest of the congregation. It is sometimes difficult to spot a neurosis or fixation when it is hidden behind a mask of spirituality.

5) Is the prophecy confirmed as being a prophecy by Christian leaders of the church who have the gift of Godly wisdom and discernment? (1 Cor 14:29-33; 1 Thess 5:21)

So there it is. Will you develop the art of listening to God? What will you do differently as a result of what you’ve learned?

Hymn (MHB 780) *by Francis H Havergal*

1. Master, speak! Thy servant heareth, waiting for Thy gracious word,
Longing for Thy voice that cheereth, Master, let it now be heard.
I am listening, Lord, for Thee; what hast Thou to say to me?
2. Master, speak! and make me ready, when Thy voice is truly heard,
With obedience glad and steady, still to follow every word
I am listening, Lord, for Thee: Master, speak, oh, speak to me!
3. Speak to me by name, O Master, let me know it is to me;
Speak, that I may follow faster, with a step more firm and free,
Where the Shepherd leads the flock in the shadow of the Rock!

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Prayers for others

Pray with passion for those things God has placed on your heart, remembering the persecuted church, world events, the sick and our leaders.

Benediction

Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. (Eph 6:14-15)

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