

God is Speaking: Are We Listening part 1

What do you think about someone who hears voices speaking to him?

We find prayer on page after page of Scripture. We find individuals praying. We find groups praying. We find great servants of God praying. We find miserable sinners praying. We even find Jesus himself praying day after day. We find prayer being taught. The prophets teach it. Jesus teaches it. The apostles teach it. In fact, it's one thing the disciples specifically asked Jesus to teach them. They didn't say, "Lord teach us to preach, teach, worship, study, but they asked, "Lord teach us to pray."

We find prayer being commanded. David sings in Psalm 32:6 *"Let everyone who is godly pray. (Ps. 32:6)"* Jesus instructs in Mt. 6:6 *"But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you."* Paul commands simply and succinctly in 1 Thes. 5:17, *"Pray continually."* James, our Lord's half brother through Mary offers this helpful instruction in James 5:13 *"Is any one of you in trouble? He should pray."*

We don't find prayer heavily woven into page after page of Scripture simply because the Bible's divinely inspired authors had the conviction that we should talk to God. They also had the conviction that God talks to us. When it comes to learning to pray, it seems a lot easier to learn how to speak to God than it is to listen to him. How can we hear his voice? How do we discern when he is speaking?

We talk about having a personal relationship with God. You can't have a personal relationship without having two-way communication. If communication is only one way, its not communication, it's a monologue. We are in relationship with God to love and to be loved. This requires that that we speak and that we listen.

I. A Few Words of Caution, Context, and Clarity

1. We Cannot Control His Speaking

First, we cannot control God's speaking. God is not a Genie in a bottle where we can rub the lamp and he will speak to us. We cannot make him speak to us in the way we want to be spoken to. There are no formulas or surefire steps that obligate God to communicate in the way we wish. I cannot control God's speaking through my holiness, sincerity or hard work.

Jesus says of the Spirit in John 3:8, and this certainly applies to the Spirit's intercession in prayer.

The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit."

From our perspective there will always be a large measure of mystery and unpredictability to God's speaking. From God's perspective he speaks with perfect wisdom. However, we are limited minds trying to understand what is unknowable to us.

Rom 11:33-34

33 Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God!

How unsearchable his judgments,

and his paths beyond tracing out!

34 "Who has known the mind of the Lord?

Or who has been his counselor?"

We must always be ready for God to speak, and we must be looking for ways we he is speaking. Then we must always be willing to listen. But we can never control his speaking. And it is not wise to try. When we try to control, force or manipulate God's communication to us, it usually leads us into dangerous territory. This is what cults and false prophets do and we need to steer clear of it.

Sometimes we want a more predictable God, which in reality means we want a more controllable God. But that is not a relationship with a living God. That is magic.

Heb 1:1 says that in the past God spoke at many times and in various ways. Think throughout biblical history. What are various ways that God has spoken and communicated?

- Angels (Luke 2:10-11; Dan. 9:20-21; Luke 1:26–38)
- Signs and miracles
- Audible Voice- voice from the heavens to a still small voice (1 Sam. 3; Luke 9:35)
- Urim and Thummin (Ex. 28:30; Num. 27:21; Deut. 33:8; 1 Sam. 28:6)
- Cloud
- Pillar of Fire (Num 14:14)
- Voice from Burning Bush (Ex. 3:2)
- Talking Donkey (Num. 22:27-30)
- Dreams (Gen. 20:3; 31:11-13, 24; 40-41; Gen. 28:10-15; Dan. 2)
- Visions (Ezek. 1:3; Rev. 4–22)
- Thunder and Lightning (Exodus 19:16-19)
- Fleece (Judges 6:37-40)
- Handwriting on a wall (Dan. 5:5-6)
- Casting of lots (Prov. 16:33; Acts 1:21-26)
- Revelations given through prophets (Heb. 1:1)

As finite human beings we are limited in the ways we can communicate. We can speak and we can write. We can gesticulate wildly. In prayer, since we are communicating with an all present spiritual being, We can even speak to God in our thoughts. We can think to Him. But even that communication is limited by our ability to collect our thoughts, express them in carefully chosen words arranged in the right order. God, as an infinite spiritual being, does not face the same barriers in communication that we do. He can communicate to us in any way he sees fit, and suits his purpose and our needs.

2. We are Always Capable of Misunderstanding Our Own Subjective Experience as the Voice of God.

A second word of caution is important. Hear me on this – We are always capable of misunderstanding our own subjective experience as the voice of God. A tremendous amount of damage has been done by people who confuse something else for God’s leading. Many things can be misunderstood as the voice of God- our own selfish desires, psychological problems, emotional swings, physical conditions, and simply an overzealous willingness to interpret anything and everything as the voice of God.

In some circles the conviction that God still speaks to us today becomes a license recklessly read God’s speaking into all sorts of things that are not God or the Holy Spirit at all. God is infinite and can speak to us in any way he sees fit, but we are finite, and we are sinful, and so we are always capable of misunderstanding our own subjective experience. Jesus had to deal with this problem in his own day. He explained why he spoke in parables, saying, “Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand.”

Jeremiah 17:9 tells us, “*The heart is deceitful above all things.*” Our selfish and sinful hearts can make us thing anything sound like God speaking to us. Not only do we end up doing something stupid, we do it with all the confidence of thinking we have divine approval. That’s a dangerous combination.

In discerning God’s voice we must always exercise great discernment. We must be cautious before leaping to conclusions. We must be willing examine our own motives. In humility, we must always be willing to admit that we were wrong and have misunderstood and misapplied God’s voice.

3. God’s Silence Does Not Mean His Absence

Something else we need to understand is that God’s silence does not mean his absence. One of the most dearly loved hymns of all time is “In the Garden” Its sentimental chorus declares, “And He walks with me. And He talks with me. And He tells me I am His own. And the joy we share as we tarry there. None other has ever known.” However, there

are times when our walk with God is not in the garden. It's in the desert. We don't hear him walking and talking with us. All we hear is silence.

God's silence can be very uncomfortable. We want God to communicate to us. We want some word of assurance, and when we don't hear it, we can become very fearful. But God's silence does not mean his absence. There are times in Scripture when we see that God is silent. Abraham experience 13 years of silence from the time he was 86 until he was 99 years old. There were 400 years of silence between the Old and New Testaments. But the silence of God does not mean his absence. Jesus promised, "I am with you always, even to the very end of the age."

Why might God remain silent for a time?

On a human level, wise parents and caring friends understand that there are times that it is better to remain silent than to speak. There are some things that we can only learn through silence.

Other times, God is not silent at all. We are simply not listening. Our minds and hearts are so filled with the noise of the world around us, that we can't hear the still small voice of God. Instead of shouting through the noise, God continues to whisper until we are ready to listen. God doesn't want to compete, He wants to be love and be loved.

If you find yourself experiencing the silence of God, here are three things God might be saying in His silence:

1. **He's telling you to listen.** If God's voice was always right with us we would soon take it for granted and not listen carefully and lovingly. His silence can create a longing to hear from him. This trains us to be more finely attuned to listen to his voice.
2. **He's telling us to be patient.** To wait on God's time. We want an answer and we want it now. Prayer doesn't work like a microwave or ATM. It's not always instant, and it isn't on-demand. In our culture of immediacy and instant gratification we need to learn to wait.
3. **He's telling us to trust.** His way and will are better than our own. If God always spoke at our beck and call we would never learn this. We need to learn that God is still in control even when we can't immediately see or hear his working.

II. Be Willing to Listen

With these words of caution, context, and clarification, what is the first takeaway when it comes to hearing the voice of God? It is this – First, we must be willing to listen to God.

Being willing to listen requires that we prepare both our hearts and our minds. We've all had conversations where the words enter our ears, but our hearts aren't really listening. Our hearts have to be ready to receive what God has to say.

Too often, our prayer life is telling God what we want, what we think, and how we feel. Certainly, we can communicate these things to God, but we must also be willing to listen. After all, the Lord's prayer is, "Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." It's not "My will be done in heaven as it is on earth." We need to be more like Samuel whose prayer was, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening." All too often our prayer is "Listen, Lord, for your servant is speaking.

Are you really ready to listen to what God has to say, even if it something you don't want to hear? A prepared heart is a humble heart, a heart willing to lay aside its own interests for what God wants. The real reason we often don't hear God speaking is that we're not really willing to hear what He has to say.

A prepared heart is a teachable heart. It's a heart that says, "I don't know it all. I'm willing to learn something new. I'm willing to try something new."

Being ready to listen also means having a prepared mind. Here's the deal. God is God. He can speak to you anytime, anyplace, anyway He chooses. But that doesn't mean that we can't make it easier to hear His voice.

A prepared mind requires a deliberate choice to shut out the chaos of our daily lives to create a space for God to speak and us to listen.

If you're in a serious relationship, you know that there are times you have to set aside for important conversations. You can't have important talks while you're mowing the lawn or doing the dishes.

We live in a world of noise. Everywhere we go, something is always competing for our attention. It competes for our eyes, our ears, our time. This is why we have to cut out some time. We have to make a place. TV off. Phone down and muted. Time and mind totally focuses on God.

Have a place you can go where it's just you and God. Have a time where it's just you and God, and then be ready to listen.

Listening to God can feel so frustrating. We go to a quiet place and wait, but then nothing happens. The clouds don't part, a light doesn't shine down, a dove doesn't land on our shoulder. We don't feel a shiver in our liver. Rather, in the silence, our minds wander, we become distracted by the most inane things, and we wonder if we're spiritual at all.

And yet, God invites us again and again in His word to listen to Him, to hear him. We must keep listening. Deep within us is a place for God. Next week we will look at all the different ways God speaks to us.

Let me wrap up this morning with what may be for many of us a new discipline of prayer. It's called a listening prayer. Prayer was never intended to be a monologue, but dialogue. Listening prayer isn't just talking. It's meditation. It is to speak to God and then to spend some time just waiting, meditating, listening.

Too often, we present our petitions to God, but then we just walk away. We say, 'Amen' and then go about our business. Instead, we need to take time to wait and listen. James 1:5 says, *"If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you."* What if we just take that at face value, and ask God for wisdom for the conundrums we face in life, and then wait for an answer.

There are a lot of things we can ask God in prayer and then wait for an answer. Ask God if there is any disobedience in your life that is hindering His purpose in your life.

Ask God what His heart is for you today. You can ask Him anything.

The key to listening prayer is then waiting for God to speak for 10 to 12 minutes. Now this isn't just a habit to be developed. It is a discipline in the truest sense of the word, because we are not used to doing nothing for 10 minutes.

Now, this is an exercise in active listening. As you wait, as you listen, jot down any scriptures that come to mind. Take time to read them and meditate on them. If god brings a worship song or hymn to mind, sing it. Worship Him.

Keep a prayer journal. Write down any thoughts, impressions or observations that you have as you listen. As you keep praying about whatever you're praying about, and you jot down your listening experience, you will see that play out before your very eyes.