

LISTENING PRAYER (“DISCERNING GOD’S GUIDANCE”)

DEFINITION

Listening prayer is grounded in the idea that God speaks to us on a regular basis in a way we can hear and understand. Our job is to listen. This may not be an audible voice, as it could be a deep awareness or impression that God is prompting you to do something or cling to truth.

To practice, quiet the noise around you. Bring your requests and prayers to God. Then, spend time in silence. If your mind wanders, bring it back to the Lord as often as you realize it. If you believe you heard from the Lord, consult Scripture and the counsel of community before acting.

SCRIPTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

- 1 Samuel 3:10 says, “And the Lord came and stood, calling as at other times, ‘Samuel! Samuel!’ and Samuel said, ‘Speak, for your servant hears.’”
- Isaiah 55:3 says, “Incline your ear, and come to me; hear, that your soul may live; and I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David.”
- John 10:27 says, “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me.”
- John 16:13 says, “When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come.”
- 1 John 5:14 says, “And this is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us.”
- Revelation 3:20 says, “Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me.”

While none of these Scriptures specifically address “listening prayer,” the idea behind the verses is key: we can hear the voice of God. Said another way, if we have God’s Spirit dwelling inside us, then we can hear him speak. This is a gift from God, and one of the amazing parts of being in his family!

BENEFITS

Some might be wary of listening prayer, believing that it can lead people to claim God “told” them whatever they want to hear. But, when done with integrity, honesty, and a system of checks on the backend, listening prayer can cultivate a conversation that you have never experienced before. Here are some of the benefits:

- You stop talking AT God and learn to talk WITH God. So often our prayers feel one sided. Yet Scriptures is clear, God not only hears us, but he responds to us. “But truly God has listened; he has attended to the voice of my prayer.” Psalm 66:19
- You learn what God’s voice sounds like. And even more than that, it becomes familiar. “I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me.” John 10:14
- You begin to turn toward God in quiet moments rather than looking to fill the silence with distraction. “Be still and know that I am God.” Psalm 46:10
- You begin to understand what it means to patiently wait on God. “I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in his word, I hope; my soul waits for the Lord more than the watchmen for the morning, more than the watchmen for the morning.” Psalm 130:5-6

Dallas Willard says, “Hearing God? A daring idea, some would say – presumptuous and even dangerous. But what if we were made for it? What if the human system simply will not function properly without it? There are good reasons to think it will not... Is it not, in fact, more presumptuous and dangerous to undertake human existence without hearing God?¹”

¹ Dallas Willard, *Hearing God: Developing a Conversational Relationship with God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), p. 9.

ENCOURAGEMENT

Listening prayer isn't about chasing mysterious messages — it's about enjoying the nearness of a God who loves to speak to His children. We come to Him surrendered, not stiff — trusting that whatever He says will always align with who He has already revealed Himself to be in Scripture. Our God is beautifully consistent. The voice that speaks to your heart will sound like the Jesus you meet in the Word.

That's why discernment isn't restrictive — it's freeing. When you weigh what you sense against Scripture and wise, godly community, you're not dampening the experience; you're protecting the joy of it. You're ensuring that what you're responding to really is the Shepherd's voice and not just your own thoughts. And when it is Him? There is nothing sweeter.

So start where His voice is clearest — the Bible. Open it slowly. Let it shape your imagination and tune your ears. The more you immerse yourself in His Word, the more familiar His voice becomes. Listening prayer then becomes less about striving to hear and more about recognizing Someone you already know.

And that recognition — that awareness that the living God is speaking — is where the joy begins.

HOW TO PRACTICE LISTENING PRAYER:

1. *Quiet the noise.* Put technology in another room. Write down anything immediately on your mind so you can set it aside for a few minutes. If possible, get away from other people by going outside or into an empty room in your house. Calm your mind and take a few deep breathes to begin.
2. *Read the Bible.* Do your daily reading or read one the Psalms. Remind yourself of who God is and set your thoughts on truth.
3. *Bring your requests to God.* Most often when practicing listening prayer there is a question or decision with which we are wrestling. If this is the case, pray about it. If not, bring general requests to God. Ask him to help you hear his voice if he has something to say.
4. *Spend time in silence.* Now, listen. See if there is anything God wants you to hear. Remember it likely won't be the audible voice of God. Rather, it might be a truth he impresses on your heart or a persistent thought you need to chase up.
5. *Consult Scripture and Community.* This is where the real work of listening prayer happens. If you believe you heard anything from God, you must test it. This is what it means to be obedience. Invite community into the conversation. Read Scripture, as God will never have you do something that contradicts the Bible. As you begin this process, hold what you hear loosely, believing that God can use his people and his word to guide you as well as his Spirit.

EXAMPLE:

1. *Quiet the noise.* Today, I planned to spend time in listening prayer. Rather than trying to accomplish this at home, I got in the car and drove to a local park before work. As it was early there not many people there. I just bought my bible and left my phone in the car. I chose a secluded bench and took a minute to do some deep breathing before starting.
2. *Read the Bible.* I turned to Psalm 130. It reminded me of several important truths: God hears my voice. He is attentive to my prayers. He is a God of mercy and forgiveness. He is a God of steadfast love for his people. He will redeem us. I sat in these truths for a couple minutes before moving on.
3. *Bring your requests to God.* Today I didn't have a decision in front of me. So, I prayed some general requests.
4. *Spend time in silence.* This is the hardest part for me... listening. And yet, I am learning to tune to God's voice. I pushed away the thoughts of my project at work and the bills on the kitchen counter, reorienting my mind to God as often as it strayed away. As I did this, a conversation from this morning kept popping into my mind. I was short with my wife on my way out the door. It wasn't a fight, but it wasn't kind. As I sat in the quiet park this morning, I felt God was prompting me to ask for forgiveness. If he is a God of forgiveness as Psalm 130 says, then I too need to model that in my marriage. I could have been gentler in my words, more gracious in my answer. I thanked God for speaking to me today.

5. *Consult Scripture and Community.* As I was thinking about what to do next, Proverbs 15:1 came to mind: “A soft answer turns away wrath, but a hard word stirs up anger.” I texted the guys in my community group, sharing what I spoke to about God this morning and asking them to hold me accountable to a conversation I needed to have with my wife when I got home from work today. They sent back messages of prayer and encouragement.

SOURCES:

Calhoun, Adele Ahlberg. *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook: Practices That Transform Us*. Revised edition, InterVarsity Press, 2015.

