

HOW TO PRACTICE LISTENING PRAYER

from Dianna Cash,
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I like to listen. I would even go so far as to label myself as a “good listener.” Sometimes my favorite kind of people to be around are the ones who can just talk and talk and talk (of course, if I actually have something I want to say, those situations can be most frustrating!) – but it’s for a completely selfish reason that I like to be around talkers – it’s just nice sometimes to not have to “carry the conversation.” (I especially like it when the talker has interesting / in depth / transparent / real / meaningful things to say!).

For as much as I like to listen (and have liked to listen for as long as I can remember!), it’s only been in the past few years that I’ve begun learning to listen to God. Yes, I’ve been following the Lord for a while... and yes, I feel like there have been many times through the years when I “heard” Him – but the kind of listening I’m talking about has become a daily practice – not just a once-in-a-while occurrence... it’s something that’s become normal in my relationship with God (well, as “normal” as getting a special word from the God of the Universe can be!).



Sometimes when one hears the phrase “listening to God,” there are immediate red flags and question marks and confusion that arise. Sometimes there are flat out statements like “God doesn’t talk to me” or “I just can’t hear God’s voice.”

But how can we hear what He’s saying if we don’t know His voice or if we never take the time to be quiet and still?

Like any new activity or skill, it takes practice to learn to listen to God. There are things I want in life – I want to know how to sew... I want to be able to do a flip on a trampoline... but if I’m unwilling to learn those skills, take the time to practice them, and have the discipline required for that particular desire, they aren’t “just going to happen.”

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It's highly unlikely that I will ever be able to sit down at a sewing machine and magically know how to sew. However, if I spent a few hours with my good friend Carey, or if I got a how-to book (and read it / followed it), or if I watched my friend Nicole for a while, I just may end up learning how to sew (flipping on a trampoline would require practice... and quite a bit of courage...).

Give it a try! And don't give up if you don't "hear" anything in the first attempt.

Try again tomorrow. Then again the next day. Commit to just sit still and alone with the Lord for 10 minutes each day.

- *It will be uncomfortable at first (silence always is – at first).*
- *Then it will be frustrating...*
- *Then it will grow to be a peaceful silence.*
- *Soon, you'll just enjoy the chance to have a regularly-scheduled quiet break in your day...*

In time, though, the silence will be broken – in a good way – as you begin to recognize the silent communication in your heart that is but only a faint shadow of a whisper. Inaudible words, but a message, nonetheless. This is the voice of the Good Shepherd. As His sheep, you are learning His voice. Before long, this daily time of stillness and listening will become some of the most important and meaningful and real, as your faith in our communicating God grows and deepens.

If I had to give my listening prayer journey a starting point, the first mark on the timeline would be at a women's retreat a few years ago. The whole retreat centered around the book ***Invitation to Silence & Solitude*** by Ruth Barton (I HIGHLY recommend it!)

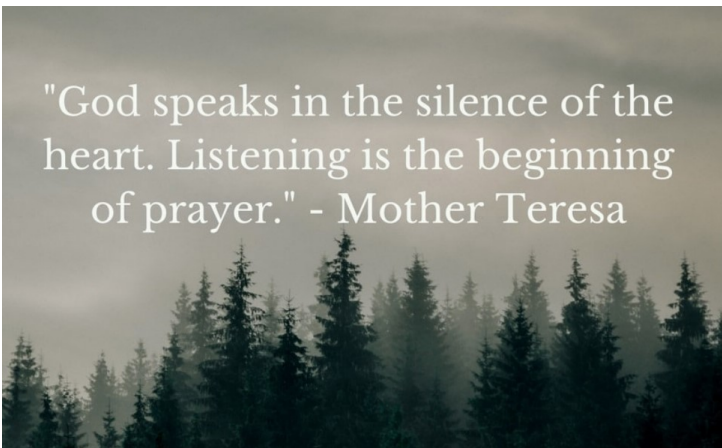
We talked in depth about listening to God and being quiet before Him. We talked about how awkward that is at times and how wonderful it can be! We were blessed with a few hours of "silence" on the second afternoon of the retreat – the whole purpose of the silence was to put into practice what we had been talking about.



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In the weeks and months following the retreat, I slowly worked through Barton's book – at a pace that was tremendously slower than I was accustomed to. I let God set the pace. I would get to the end of a chapter and ask God if I could move on to the next one. Sometimes the answer was “yes” – other times it was “re-read this one.”

I just continued practicing daily, and I participated in our church's weekly time of Crave and also in our church's annual Prayer Weeks, which are far more about listening prayer than everyone “getting in a circle and praying for one another”. (I must clarify: there's nothing wrong with getting in a circle and praying for one another... just wanted to emphasize that this was another place of getting to practice my listening skills).



The more I've gotten to enjoy listening prayer, the more I've realized that it's not so much about the words that God speaks or the instructions He gives (though those things are wonderful!!). It's about the relationship... it's about the intimacy... it's about me knowing Him a little more.

And in knowing Him, I learn more about who I am. I learn more and more about how to be His child.

I want to hear from the Lord. I want to know His voice.

So what does that look like? How does one learn to listen to God? For me, it looks like coming to God and asking a question – sometimes a specific question... sometimes a generic question...

My favorite questions to ask Him sound something like this:

- “God, what are your thoughts towards me?” (based on Psalm 139:17-18)
- “God, what do you want me to know today?”
- “God, what do you want me to do?” (either in general...or in a specific situation)

And then I listen as He responds and I write down what I feel like I'm hearing.

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Often the thoughts will start coming and I know they aren't from me. How do I know they aren't from me? I'm not completely sure other than I've learned what my thoughts are like and what His thoughts are like!

So, I just start writing – and usually it happens that the “next thought” won't come until the first part is written...even though I want to “get ahead” and hear the whole of what the Lord is saying, He won't give me the second sentence until the first one is written down (I like this – helps me know that it's from Him and not just from me!).

It's definitely been a journey of learning His voice... and discerning His truth... a journey of learning how to differentiate from His thoughts and my own... a journey I am happily still on and hope to always be on!

There are times when I hear “wrong”... and that's okay, because it's not about ME hearing correctly... it's about His desire to be in communication with me and my willingness to participate in the relationship.

As we listen, we learn His voice. We learn to recognize what He is saying... and we practice... we get more comfortable with the quiet and more familiar with the voice of our Father. But we always keep in mind that He speaks in a variety of ways. He speaks in different ways to different people – and even in different ways to the same person... because He's longing for us to be in communication with Him, dependent on Him – not depending on a system or formula for hearing Him.

Fun fact: the writing of this article was a result of listening prayer! Nick asked me about writing something on listening prayer a while back... and I've just been waiting for “the right time” (I wonder how long it's going to take me before I realize that often the “right time” isn't something that's coming... it's just something that IS).



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Today, I was spending some undistracted time with God and as I was wrapping things up, I simply asked “what do you want me to do now?” And, quite honestly, I was really hoping that I wouldn't hear anything – cause I was hoping a nap was in my future! But I really didn't think that was going to be the response because I had half-a-dozen other things that needed to get done...

But I asked (and I've learned that you really shouldn't ask a question if you're not willing to receive a response!), and the answer was “work on the listening prayer post.” Then came the choice – do I do the thing I think I'm hearing God tell me to do? Do I do one of the other things on my to-do list? Do I forget it all and just do what I want to do – take a nap? Choosing to obey the instructions we've now heard just heard while listening... now that's another blog post altogether!!

God, what are your thoughts towards me?
(see Psalm 139:17-18)

God, what do you want me to know today?

God, what do you want me to do?
(either in general... or in a specific situation)