

God Speaks. God Leads.

Listening in Prayer

God Speaks

What is God speaking to you? Do you know how to find out? When is the last time you truly listened to His voice? You may have never had an experience like Moses in Exodus 3, who heard the audible voice of God from within a burning bush. But cultivating the practice of listening intently to God can greatly enhance your personal prayer life and help you be more in tune with God's will for your life.

There are many ways God speaks to us today: through Scripture (2 Timothy 3:16-17), His Son Jesus (Hebrews 1:1-2), nature and creation (Romans 1:20), circumstances of our lives (Acts 17:26-27), other believers (Proverbs 19:20-21), the Holy Spirit (John 14:17) and prayer (Romans 8:26).

We will be focusing on the way God speaks through prayer. It is often easy to think of prayer as speaking *to* God. Asking *Him* to move in certain ways. This is certainly the case, but we often erroneously neglect a central truth about prayer: much of prayer should involve *listening* to God. When we make space for Him to speak to us, we are declaring that His leading is supreme.

When God speaks, it is important to remember that His character is constant. He speaks to His people most directly through the Bible, so nothing He speaks to you in prayer will ever contradict what the Word of God says is true. Praying and reading Scripture should be our first points of action when we need God to speak to us about a particular issue. After we have spent time praying and reading, we can also seek the wise counsel of other like-minded believers in order to confirm what God is speaking to our hearts.

Andrew Murray describes the sin of prayerlessness and the importance of daily entering the inner chamber (taking time and making space in prayer for God to speak) in his book *The Prayer Life*. He writes,

The great reason why the inner chamber is not attractive is that people do not know how to pray. Their stock of words is soon exhausted and they do not know what further to say, because they forget that prayer is not a soliloquy, where everything comes from one side; but it is a dialogue, where God's child listens to what the Father says, and replies to it, and then asks for the things he needs.

Speaking to God is only part of the blessing of prayer. When we practice listening and responding to God through seeking His presence daily, we become more and more like Him. John 10:27 reveals a central truth about those who know and follow God, listening to His voice as He speaks to them: "My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me."

We must think of prayer not as simply a way to express our needs to God but as a means of knowing Him more intimately and seeking to find out what His will is for us. As we approach Him humbly and with a desire to hear what He has to say, we let go of the ways we *want* Him to answer us.

God Leads

From Genesis to Revelation, we see this pattern portrayed in Scripture: God is the initiator; His

people are the responders. God's initiation in our salvation is absolute. Jesus says to His followers in John 15:16, "You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last—and so that whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you." We did not force God's hand. He rescued us in our sin and initiated our adoption as children of God, cherished and empowered members of His family.

1 Corinthians 1:30 says about God, "it is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption." We did nothing to deserve this gift.

Ephesians 2:4-6 shows us the ultimate example of God's leadership and initiation: "But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus." God rescued us from our slavery to sin into new life with Jesus!

If you have a relationship with God, He has been your initiator since the very beginning. And He continues to lead you at all times!

1 Thessalonians 5:23-24 remind us of our true leader, and what He promises to do in us: "May God himself, the God of peace, *sanctify* you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful to do it."

God leads us in His sanctifying work in our lives so that we can be presented as pure upon Jesus' return. He has called us, and He will be faithful to make it happen. We can be "confident in this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus" (Philippians 1:6).

We can completely trust in God's leadership. He initiates, and we respond with gratitude and obedience.

Listening in Prayer

Do you ever stop to think about whose lead you are following? If you were to truly examine your motivations in life – both in big and small areas – would you find that you are following God's lead, or that you are driven by your own desires?

Thinking we already know what God wants is very different from *asking* Him what He wants. When we take time to listen to Him daily, we rightly restore God to the role of initiator in our lives.

In prayer, we can often be tempted to feel guilty about our shortcomings. Instead of focusing on what we're doing wrong and trying to fix it, we should instead learn to get help from the Lord and from the wise counsel of other believers. We shouldn't simply feel guilty for not being "good Christians." You and I have so much fear of rejection, including from God. But He died knowing everything wrong about us. We are never going to be perfect in our behavior but He loves us deeply!

2 Corinthians 12:9-10 say that God's grace is sufficient for us, for His power is made perfect in weakness. Paul writes here that he *delights* in weaknesses: "For when I am weak, then I am strong." God is exalted through our shortcomings. This is the most encouraging news for the

broken, sinful person who has been rescued by God's initiation of mercy and grace! When we come face to face with a weakness, need, pain or loss, we can choose to see it as a *gift* from God to help us practice total dependence on Him as we listen to His voice and follow His lead.

Discussion Questions

1. Do you take time to regularly listen to God's voice? How could your relationship with Him be impacted if you practiced this daily?
2. How do you know when God is speaking into your life? What should you look to in order to confirm that what He is saying is true?
3. Are you open to letting God speak to you through prayer, even if He does not answer in the way you want Him to?
4. Why is it often difficult to lay down our desires and submit to God's leadership rather than our own?
5. Are there areas in your life where you are not following God's lead? What actions do you need to take in order to change that?
6. When God initiates, what is our appropriate response?
7. Is there an area of weakness through which God is inviting you to depend on Him and follow His lead?
8. What is one practical way you can practice following God's lead this week?

Application

The following questions are adapted from a session at Incite 2014 (Chi Alpha pastors' conference) given by Nina Mullett. The questions are designed to help you engage with God in personal prayer. Speak them directly to God and reflect on what He speaks to you. Create space today to sit in His presence, in the "inner chamber," asking Him these things as you seek His transforming power through listening.

- What were you saying to me the day I accepted your invitation of eternal life – the day I was adopted into your family? What impact does hearing/remembering that have on me right now?
- How are you inviting me to depend on you through the *gift* of a weakness, need, pain or loss?
- In my present practices of prayer and ministry, am I following your lead or trying TO lead? Whose lead am I following?
- Is there anything I've done today, or is there a longer-term issue in my life, that grieves your heart? How do you want me to respond to that?
- Am I willing to repent? To make a total change of direction if needed? Help me to do that.
- What action are you asking me to take here? Will you help me embrace it?
- Do you want me to confess that sin/struggle to anyone else?
- What do you like about me? What brings you pleasure about me?