

God Speaks: Listening to God through Prayer

By Steven Carrizal

About midway through my college years, I met some people who lit my spiritual life on fire—or maybe I should say that God lit my spiritual life on fire through these new friends. The key practice they introduced to me was quiet time—morning time spent in Bible reading and prayer. It was the prayer part of this that sparked the fire. Growing up in a ministry family (my dad was a preacher) I was no stranger to prayer. I was surrounded by prayer—in church, at home, on vacation, in large groups, in small groups, and alone. People all around me modeled genuine, heartfelt prayer. Yet, in college I experienced a more serious approach to prayer that was intentional and intense. I learned to present my life before God and plead for change, healing, and insight for myself and my friends. So I kept a running list of people and specific circumstances to pray for. Each morning (well, most mornings) I faithfully named these in prayer. During this time, I found great purpose and expended much energy in the work of praying.

However, though my experience in college was transformative, through the years, I began to struggle with the growing list I was praying through. People shared difficult circumstances and deep suffering. I discovered that I did not have the capacity to maintain an emotional or compassionate connection for these situations. Eventually, I stopped praying through the list. Without a way to deepen the spiritual reservoir needed for such outpouring, I wore out and felt dry.

Then I got to know a woman in my church at the same time I began a graduate class on Spiritual Formation. While the spiritual formation class gave me the information, the woman in my church became my teacher. Both taught me something new about prayer—to *listen*. My practice of prayer until this point had always been about me speaking to God; no one taught me how to stop talking and, instead, rest in the presence of God. The more I learned to sit with God and listen I discovered that the weight of my list floated away as I realized God already knew what was on it. Instead of doing all the speaking, I began to give space to the presence of God. I learned to sit in the quiet, to welcome in the silence, to pay attention to the nudge of the Spirit, feel God's embrace, and listen to God's voice.

Prayer as listening does not replace prayer as speaking. Rather it deepens and matures our relationship with God. Just as there is a rhythm in our personal relationships of speaking and listening, there are times to speak to God, but also times when I need to take the posture of Samuel—"Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening" (1 Samuel 3:9).

Silence

Before any listening can happen in prayer there must be silence. We need a nice quiet place free of external distractions. We also need to quiet our mind and heart to prepare "the way for inner seclusion and enables us to listen to the quiet voice of the Spirit."¹ We begin our listening in silence. But how do we nurture that silence? Here are some practices that open up that space to hear God speak.

¹ Kenneth Boa in *Conformed to His Image: Biblical and Practical Approaches to Spiritual Formation* (Zondervan, 2001), p. 83.

Breath Prayer

This is an important starting place for me. Breath prayer is the exercise that sparked my renewed life of prayer. In both Greek and Hebrew, the word for breath and spirit are the same. Breath prayer combines breath and spirit in the same moment so that our spirit is caught up with the Spirit of God as we breathe. In breath prayer, we find a sentence that heightens our awareness of who God is, how God is already at work, or connects with our need for God.² We then say the sentence in the rhythm of our breathing—first half as we inhale, second half as we exhale. In the process, we nurture the internal silence as the words become background to the presence of God.

- Determine an amount of time for your exercise. For starters, set a timer for five minutes.
- Identify a sentence from a passage. Again for starters, use the opening sentence of Psalm 42—*“As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, my God.”*
- Start your time and breathe the sentence in and out: (inhale) *as the deer pants for streams of water*; (exhale) *so my soul pants for you, my God*.
- At the end of the time, reflect on the brief exercise and write down your thoughts on these questions: How did you experience the presence of God in this moment? How did this one sentence shape your perceptions of yourself, of God, and the life you are living?

Listening List

Somewhat like a prayer list which we might develop for intercessory prayer, a listening list details various concerns in our circle of influence. However, whereas in a prayer list we ask God for specific outcomes, with a listening list we lay the items one by one and ask what it is the Lord’s desire of us in each situation.

- Come to the silence, creating a buffer from the previous moments of activity and the moments of prayer to come. Centering prayer is a good way to do this. Focus in on your breathing on some sacred word, phrase, or image that helps you put the world around us aside.
- After a few minutes look at your list. (This would work best with an abbreviated list—no more than five items.) In silence slowly process your list in your mind, pausing as you read each item. Instead of requesting God’s action, ask this: “Lord, how can I respond in this circumstance?” Sit with this question in silence for another minute or two.
- Reflect on this experience. What do you sense God asking of you?

Life-Centered Prayer³

Though we may try to hide from others and even ourselves, we cannot hide from God. *Examen* is a practice that helps us carry out the psalmist’s prayer: “Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting” (Psalm 139:23-24, NIV). It is a practice of self-examination and awareness of our life, daily or weekly. It is

² Houston Heflin’s *Pray Like You Breathe: Exploring the Practice of Breath Prayers* (Creek Bend Press, 2017) is a great starting place. In this short handbook he lists many sentences from the Psalms that can be used as breath prayers.

³ Found in *Soul Feast: An Invitation to the Christian Spiritual Life* (WJK Press, 1995) by Marjorie J. Thompson. Thompson credits Ben Campbell Johnson from his book *Invitation to Pray*.

an opportunity to lay ourselves open and let God identify what is happening, where we need confession, where we need transformation. One way to do this is through an exercise called *Life-Centered Prayer*—a process of self-examination that takes place at the end of the day and takes into account the day's major events. The following is an adaptation for use in a group meeting.

- *Gather*: Think through the highs and lows of the previous week and identify one event on which to focus. You might start with making a list in writing then circling the event of choice.
- *Review*: As you focus on this one event, reflect upon it without judgement or excuses.
- *Give thanks*: Consider how you can find gratitude in this event. Where was God present? How did God provide for or sustain you? Give thanks now for what you might have been unable to sense in the moment.
- *Confess*: Consider any fault (thought, word, or deed) of yours in this event. Is there any wrong you recognize now for which you are responsible. Confess that sin.
- *Find meaning*: Reflect on the significance of this event with questions such as, What is God saying to me? What am I being called to do? How is this connected to the rest of my life? Share something you sense God teaching you in this event.

Ask the Heart⁴

This is another exercise of *Examen*. More than awareness, though, with this exercise we seek clarity around a particular issue. Here's the process:

- Identify a specific question you want to explore. Here's one try: Have I ever expected to hear God's voice? How would I know if I heard it?⁵
- Start the process of silence by relaxing your body and mind. Breathe deeply.
- As thoughts move to the side, think about the question slowly and gently. Savor each thought.
- After a determined period of silence, bring your attention back to the present. Reflect on your experience and make note of what you learned by writing in a journal and/or sharing with a friend.

Here are other questions you might ask: Am I becoming less afraid of being known by God? Is prayer developing in me as a welcome discipline? Am I learning to move beyond personal offense and freely forgive those who have wronged me?⁶

Conclusion

Listening to God in prayer does not come easy for those of us who are used to do all the talking. We may struggle with staying focused in the silence or we may struggle to know how God is speaking to us. Do not be disheartened. Though the exercises above may prove challenging at first, improvement comes with practice. Be patient, rest in the silence, and listen.

⁴ Adapted from exercise found in *Holy Silence: The Gift of Quaker Spirituality* (Paraclete Press, 2005) by J. Brent Bill.

⁵ Bill, J. Brent, *Holy Silence: The Gift of Quaker Spirituality*, p. ix.

⁶ Adapted from questions found in *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home* (Harper San Francisco, 1992), p. 157.