

FINDING INTIMACY WITH JESUS THROUGH LISTENING PRAYER

It is said that we live in a postmodern era in which logical proofs for God's existence and rational explanations of His character are of little interest to people. This may be true of many people. However, if one was to meander through any bookstore you would see that numerous books have been written on spirituality and our insatiable need to experience God. Not only do we as human beings desire to prove the truth of who God is but it seems we have a God-given longing to make sense of God and experience Him in meaningful and personal ways.

Scripture testifies to the fact that we can experience God. In Roman 1:20 we read that "his invisible attributes, namely hid eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse."

Psalms 19:1-4 assures that God discloses Himself in nature "The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of His hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge. There is no language where their voice is not heard." And then later in verses 7-14 we see that God discloses Himself through the Word, "The law of the Lord is perfect converting the soul; the testimony of the Lord is sure making wise the simple." So we see that God not only discloses Himself through the world but as "Lord" in relationship with Himself through the Word."

So the truth is: as God has revealed Himself to us, we can experience Him. And yet many feel as though there is this mystical side of God that we can't quite get our arms around and so why should we even try. Some of you have tried and just given up. Others of you sit every morning in the Word and in prayer and it seems as though you don't experience God anymore than you did 10 years ago. And then others are continually testing their thoughts and feelings asking "Is this from God, or was I dreaming it was God? And if it isn't from God, then where did that thought come from?" In other words, we question if we've really heard from God.

Why then is God so elusive, especially when He is the One who is supposed to be in the business of making Himself known? I keep telling people in counseling that God is near, that God loves them. It sure would make my counseling easier if He'd show up and embrace them when I'm trying to assure them of this. Instead He often hides Himself in the mystery of who He is.

Hopefully the more elusive He is, the more we want Him. For the best of us, while the God of the Bible can be an elusive one, He is elusive precisely because He wants to share more and more of Himself with us, drawing us to Himself like a lover draws the beloved. He wants to reveal Himself not as some dime-store idol that makes perfect sense to us, but as God Almighty, Holy, Wondrous, the God who in His infinite love revealed Himself to us in Christ and started us on a journey of love that will never end.

And so, the problem of experiencing God must somewhat rest in us, not in God. I believe the extent to which we experience Him lays within each one of us.

It was almost 10 years ago to the day that God invited Bill and me on a journey to start a church where all would experience Him in personal and meaningful ways. I do not believe that mission has changed. If you are part of this Waterbrooke Fellowship, know that there is a calling on your life for that mission. It does not matter who or what you have been up to this point in time, God has called all of his people to experience Him as we become more like Christ in holiness and godliness. The apostle Peter asked the early Christians, "What kind of people ought you be?" His answer was, "You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming" (2 Pet 3:11; 1 Thess 4:7; Rom 12:1; 1 Tim 2:2). We come to experience God in true joy, peace, and rest as we train ourselves in godliness, purity, and holiness becoming more and more like Christ. The big question is – "Why hasn't this happened and how on earth do we get there?"

It saddens my heart to realize that in recent years the church has failed to lead people into an experience of God and really knowing Him. We have taught a lot about God – not that this is wrong, but we have failed to then lead people into a heart experience of Him. According to George Barna research, nearly two-thirds of regular church attenders say that they have never experienced God's presence in a church service. 48% of regular attenders have not experienced God's presence in the last year.

"Experiencing God" for me is not just some goose-bump emotional high, but is exactly what Paul talks about in Phil 3:7-11 "But whatever was for my profit, I now consider loss for the sake of Jesus Christ; and what is more I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus, my Lord *for whose sake I have lost all things*. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is thru faith in Christ – the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith. I want to know Christ and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in His sufferings, becoming like Him in His death, and so somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead."

To “know” Christ here is not to have intellectual knowledge of Him, but the Greek word, *gnoske* means to know experientially and personally. It is also close to an Old Testament word that means knowledge of God thru love and obedience. Surely we experience God as we obey Him.

Apart from Christ, we cannot fully experience God. No amount of law-keeping, self-improvement, discipline, or religious effort can bring us into a right relationship of experiencing God. We are made righteous by trusting in Christ. This is why the Psalmist said in Psalm 19, that even though we can experience God through His created world, salvation or faith in Him can only come through His revealed Word, the Scriptures as it is applied by the Holy Spirit. Jesus Christ is the Living Word (John 1:1).

Paul is saying here in Philippians that knowing Christ is through faith in Him. There is no other way. Faith is that confident, continuous confession of total dependence on and trust in Jesus Christ for the necessary requirement to enter God’s kingdom. And that requirement is righteousness. Jesus said in John 14:6, “I am the way, the Truth and the Life, no man comes to the Father but by me.” I would pray this morning that if there be any who have not put their faith in Christ, now is the appointed day, do not tarry. We do not know when our time is up or when Christ will return. Trust in Him today. I would invite you to share with Bill or one of the Overseers your desire this morning.

For the rest of us, we are on a journey of being transformed into the likeness of Christ. That is our highest calling (Rom 1:6; 8:30; 2 Thess 5:24; 1 Pet 3:8-12; 2 Tim 1:8-9). However, not only do we not think about this often, but we spend little time in discerning how to go about transformation. If asked the question “How are we transformed?” probably 8 out of 10 Christians could not tell you how this happens. Yet, the Bible is clear that we are to put to death our earthly flesh and clothe ourselves with Christ (Col. 3:1-17; Eph 4:20-24).

Now you are probably sitting there thinking I was supposed to be talking on prayer and wondering when I was going to get there. The point needs to be made that as God reveals Himself through nature, the written Word, and His son, Jesus, the Living Word, we have a responsibility to pay attention to, or listen to all of these revelations of God. That is how we come to experience Him.

I am not as narrow-minded as to believe that we cannot experience the presence of God through nature. Surely we can see the God of nature through a beautiful sunset, or the touch of a new born babe, or a soft, beautiful kitten. If you have not experienced the majesty and greatness of God through His creation you are missing out on much of who God is. But it takes an awareness, a slowing down in life, and paying attention to what God puts before your eyes.

One of the tools that God has given us to come into relationship with Him is through prayer. Now before you shut your eyes and doze off, I realize we have all heard much about prayer. We may even know all the scripture verses on prayer. But do we do it? Do we yearn for it every day? Do we actually see it as the means of coming into sweet fellowship with Jesus. Or do we see it as our duty?

Many want to experience God; they want to know Him and know when He’s speaking. The problem is - when we go to prayer we do all the talking and seldom listen for His voice. You would think that the One who has the most important things to say would have the most time to speak. We go to prayer with our laundry list asking God to meet all our needs and wants, then, we go about our day not giving one thought to what we have prayed. We make no connections of the day’s events with our prayer requests. And God could not get a word in edgewise to speak to us anyway because we are going at such a furious pace, all that we hear is the buzz around us. Our minds are attentive to everything else but God.

I know from whence I speak. Last year I knew for quite some time that I was way over stressed and needed a rest. I didn’t know the extent of that until Bill and I were on a pastor’s retreat. The first evening we were asked why we were there and finally through tears I had to admit I really didn’t know why. I knew I was bone weary, but didn’t know what God wanted to show me. It was a wonderful surprise to me that the whole week was based on the contemplative lifestyle of being quiet with the Lord in silence and solitude – disciplines I had learned many years ago as I spent time at the Cenacle in Wayzata - a Catholic retreat and prayer center. Some of these disciplines are still part of my life now. I came away from this retreat knowing that I needed to return more and more to a less stressful lifestyle, hiding myself in Christ.

Many of you know that recently I took a few months sabbatical. As I do with all things, I was ready to attack the contemplative lifestyle with gusto. I had carefully thought through the issues I wanted to talk to the Lord about - mind you these were all good Christian things – relationships with friends and family, vision for ministry. However, in January as I took the time, looking forward to great revelations from God and His Word, I soon discerned that that these things were not on God’s heart for me. God was not necessarily drawing me to some things; He was drawing me to Someone – Himself. I was soon to find out it was the One at the end of myself. He was going to teach me a whole new way of living: abiding in Christ minute by minute – “that I might gain Christ and be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ.”

Then, through my painful shoulder surgery and other health issues God literally had to bring me to a halt. Day by day I had to depend upon His strength just to get by. Once again, He was teaching me how to let go of self and depend upon Him by listening for Him. Not only that, but how to actively abide in the Vine. I realized this does not just happen. It is a constant relinquishing of mind, body, and soul over to the Lord. And yet there can be no striving in this because when you do, it becomes just another means of trying to reach Christ. It becomes just another act of doing. God was teaching me that being a Christ follower is first just that - it's all about being - not striving and doing ministry. Abiding in the Vine, is how we come into that— being with Christ, being found in Him, knowing Him in an intimate relationship.

Oswald Chambers says, "In Christian work the initiative is too often the realization that something has to be done and I must do it. That is never the attitude of the spiritual saint; his aim is to secure the realization of Jesus Christ in every set of circumstances he is in ... Many of us are after our own ends, and Jesus Christ cannot help Himself to our lives. If we are abandoned to Jesus, we have no ends of ourselves to serve."

I believe this abandonment to Christ is the believer's goal as sanctification progresses. For every one of us this takes a relinquishment of self and self effort. For me it took 10 years of ministry with very little rest. I can tell you I struggle with this hugely. I'm a doer, but God is teaching me how to rest in Him. He has shown me that often taking the bull by its horns is really self effort to make things happen and accomplish a lot. But even worse than that, it really says, "I don't trust God to get this done, therefore I'll do it myself." It takes far greater grace to allow God to work in a situation than to control it myself by moving forward and getting it done.

I believe there are those here this morning who want to trust God and experience Christ in the depths of their being. There is a yearning to hear His voice and to know Him.

I want to share with you this morning how to find intimacy with Christ through listening prayer. We listen so that we may hear from God and experience Him.

Prayer is not trying to get God to see things our way. Nor is it a matter of trying to manipulate God as a kind of puppet whose strings we pull with our prayers. Prayer is in sort, a preparation of Jesus in our lives; to pour out your soul to Him in love and worship ... to sit at His feet ... and listen for His voice ... to take time to receive Him when the cares of life demand your attention. This may be the greatest challenge for a Christian. Is it worth the challenge? Winning this struggle for a life in His presence, a life of moment by moment communion with Him will bring the greatest rewards this side of heaven!

Prayer has two dimensions to it. One is talking to God and the other is listening for God and through both of these dimensions you begin to develop a relationship with Him. As I have said before many of us know the biblical imperatives of how we are to ask in prayer. Scripture says we are to ask in Jesus' name (John 14:14); we are to ask according to God's will, and we are to ask with the heart, in faith, in a forgiving spirit, with the soul, with confidence in God, with submission to God, with honest lips, with deliberation, with humility and the list goes on and on. There are many good books that lay out for us the biblical way to pray. There are far lesser books that describe how to listen for God in prayer. I think most of us are well experienced in asking for things in prayer, but to sit quietly and listen for God to speak may be an entirely new entity for us.

Listening in life and in prayer is a very similar experience. Your friends are blessed if you are a good listener; for as a listener you are a special gift to your friends. In listening to more than the words they speak, you are listening to the depths of who they are. You are saying to your friends, "You are worth listening to, you are valuable." If we do not listen to others, and they to us, there is no bond of friendship and love. Friendship and intimacy grows through being really present to each other. Listening involves being with another person in a special way, giving attention to the other's words and especially it involves being fully present to the other individual. That is real presence.

Relationships involve ever so much more than words. Prayer too is more than saying words to God. Matthew 6:7 says, "In your prayers, do not babble as the pagans do, for they think that by using many words they will make themselves learned." Basic to our relationships is the ability to listen and basic to prayer is our ability to listen. As in our relationships, prayer involves a matter of being present before God. To be present one has to listen.

Whenever we want to hear from the Lord, we must first listen from his Word and then meditate on it. There is a difference between studying God's Word and meditating on God's Word. In John 8:32 Jesus says that "If you abide in my word, you are my disciples indeed, and the truth shall set you free." When we study God's Word we are searching for truth to apply to our lives.

Search for truth	- allow Hs to give insight, passive
Analytical	- devotional
exegesis –pulling meaning out	- relish, mull over in mind
God speaking to our mind	- God speaking to our heart

In Psalm 19, verse 14, David says “Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, O Lord.” (Psalm - Ps. 119:48, Ps 63:6; Gen 24:63, 1 Sam 3:1-18, 1 Kings 19:9-18, Jer 20:9)

When I begin to meditate, it’s hard for me to separate my “praying” to God from the reading of His Word. For me, they go hand in hand. It’s hard to decipher where one ends and the other starts. Obviously I start with the reading of God’s Word, the *logos* of His inspired Word, allowing it to sink into my spirit. Then, as I meditate on the passage or verse, the Holy Spirit takes these truths, giving insight into it. These are the “rhemas” of Scripture and should become a part of our daily thoughts and actions. When God gives us a “rhema” word to act on He often confirms it by a second and third “rhema” through His Word as I meditate on other relevant verses.

In order for us to hear from God through listening prayer, here are some practical tips:

ASKING AND SEEKING

Ask God for help to hear and see. Without Him I can do nothing (John 15:5).

I ask God to open my spiritual ears, eyes and understanding (Eph 1:17-21). I ask Him to make me spiritually attuned to the many ways He speaks, because His world is spiritual and is often superimposed over our natural world. Unless I ask for help, I miss His multidimensional life of living in His kingdom.

Seek and ask God to send His daily bread. In Matthew 6:11, Jesus instructs His disciples to pray for daily bread. We acknowledge that God is our Sustainer and that He provides for our needs. Do we even recognize His hand in our lives? Do we see His provision? As we become more and more attuned to this daily bread we can see God in our everyday circumstances.

Ask God to show you through His Word, specific Scripture that you can memorize and bring to remembrance throughout the day that will keep you alive to His Spirit throughout the day.

RECORDING AND KEEPING

Begin to write down and journal what God is teaching you. As you reread your notes you may find that God is showing you one particular habit or sin issue He wants to change or something new He wants to reveal to you about Himself, His purposes or His ways. Be faithful in what God shows you or gives you. If I have not used, honored, appreciated or kept what He has given me, why should He give you more? If I am faithful with what He gives me, He will build upon my portion and continue to give me more (Matt 25:21; Luke 8:15).

OVERCOMING OBSTACLES

I must guard my eye and heart gates from carnal television and media. The eye is the gateway to the body. If I open myself to darkness, how great is that darkness (Matt 6:22, 23). We cannot be double-minded in serving two masters. There is no middle road. Either we serve and open ourselves to the one of darkness or to the God of light.

Along with this, we must guard against our flesh. This is the “biggy” in hearing from the Lord. (2 Pet 1:6; 1 Tim 4:7-8) We all know the fight against our flesh. Millions of dollars are spent on diet aids in trying to lose weight. It is much easier to listen and hear from the Lord when all flesh is subdued and the body is at rest. Therefore, discipline your flesh in all the ways you give in to, whether that be food, alcohol, sex, a loose tongue, busyness, selfish ambition, or fear of man. When we give up the battle of the flesh, we can rest in God both physically and spiritually and begin to hear the quiet still voice of the Lord instead of our own battling thoughts.

We must guard ourselves against the action of the evil one. We must learn to use the weapons God has given us in His Word (Eph 6:10-18; 2 Cor 10:3-5).

I would guess that the number one obstacle to hearing from the Lord is busyness. I mentioned a few weeks ago the acronym for the word “busy” - “Being under satan’s yoke.” The psalmist said, “Be still and know that I am God” (Psalm 46:10). Coming into an intimate relationship with Jesus will cost you something. You will have to sacrifice your time, other joys, aspirations, and relationships that take time.

I have recently added a new obstacle that keeps us from listening and hearing the Lord. Avoid any medications that cause you to have a slumbering spirit. I have seen where Christians are too sleepy to hear what God is saying because their mind is controlled by legal drugs. In the root word that we get the name *pharmacy*, comes a Greek word that means medication, sorcery, witchcraft. There are some medications that open wide the doors to the

demonic world. When our mind is in a drug-induced stupor, we invite the enemy to take control of our mind. Paul said, "I shall pray with the spirit and I shall pray with the mind also" (I Corinthians 14:15).

We all have obstacles in our lives that keep us from hearing the voice of the Lord. Begin by the grace of God to put off the flesh and put of righteousness in Christ Jesus (Ephesians 4:22-24).

The reason we want to hear from the Lord is so that we can come into a more intimate relationship with Jesus. As He reveals Himself to us in love, we can't help to respond in love. We begin to fall in love with Jesus and we are forever changed. But we must remember that it is God, not ourselves, who is the source of the transformation being made like Christ. Our part is to offer ourselves to Him in ways that enable God to do that transforming work of grace. As we come to Him in listening prayer, we yield ourselves to Him, putting aside all that is of self, relinquishing our agendas, our expectations, our dreams, our hopes, to hear from Him. *It's deciding that we want what God wants for us, more than what we want for ourselves.* Then it's a choice to let go, surrender ourselves to Jesus, and hear from Him.

Your first calling as a Christian is not to serve the Lord. Your first calling is to sit at His feet and learn from him, like Mary who Jesus said had chosen the better part. The first call of the apostles was "that they might be with Him" (Luke 10:38-42, Mark 3:14). Why not start listening to Him more closely in prayer? How about pouring out on Jesus some of your valuable time and energy instead of giving Him your leftovers? The enemy has robbed you of your highest privilege long enough – to live in the presence of God.

Jesus has chosen you just like He chose the twelve. He has chosen you ... first of all ... to be with Him What will you chose?