

LISTENING PRAYER

I could tell our prayers were not working; I'm not exactly sure why, but I just had a strong sense nothing was going to happen. We were praying for a dear friend who seemed to keep getting sick, over and over again. He would get well, then fall back into some illness. It was a cycle that was undermining his faith and ours. So we gathered a group of folks to lay hands on our friend and pray for physical healing. Only, it wasn't working, and I could tell it wouldn't even if we kept at it.

I paused, and quietly in my heart I asked Jesus, *What is going on here, Lord? What are we doing wrong? How do we change the way we are praying?*

Jesus replied, *Ask him how he feels about his body.*

So I interrupted the prayer—an awkward but necessary thing to do—and told our friend, “I think Jesus is asking you a question: How do you feel about your body?” His cynical reply was immediate: “Easy—I hate my body.” And there was our answer; there was the break in the wiring. You can't bring blessing into a body while

the owner of that body is cursing it! He first needed to break those agreements with self-hatred, specifically hatred of his body, and all the judgments he was bringing against himself. Having done that, we were able to resume prayer and soon he was feeling well again.

Ask God What to Pray

The single most significant decision that has changed my prayer life more than any other, the one step that has brought about greater results than all others combined is this (drum roll, please) . . .

Asking Jesus what I should pray.

So simple, and so revolutionizing! Utterly obvious once we consider it, but something we so rarely practice. That is probably one of the side effects of the “prayer is just asking God to do something” view; no doubt it is also more of the negative consequences of the orphan-and-slave mentality. But if prayer is in fact a partnership, then I want to be in alignment with God! For here is his promise to us: “This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us—whatever we ask—we know that we have what we asked of him” (1 John 5:14–15).

Breathtaking. More trumpets! This one promise alone is so wonderful, so hopeful; it ought to make our hearts sing, courage and faith swelling within us like a rising volcano. If we pray in line with God’s will, we can stand firmly on the promise *it will be done*. Amen will finally become *AMEN!*

“But how do I know what the will of God is?” Now, that is the sixty-thousand-dollar question. Let me assure you that you can; God does not torment us by hiding his will from us, though

at times it does take a little effort to discern it. Both Elijah and Ananias were praying with confidence because they clearly heard from God. I believe that confidence can be ours.

Not Just Sympathy

Our little fellowship has grown so much in our understanding of prayer over the past thirty years. (And God has been so kind, every step of the way, honoring the efforts of “children” and “young men” as we moved toward maturity.) We have seen many breakthroughs—physical healings, psychological healings, deliverances, rescued marriages, rescued lives. We’ve seen the weather change, just as James promised we would (James 5:17–18). Many, many times.

But despite all the stunning victories in our past, I never assume I know what the new prayer need before me requires. If someone asks me, “Pray that my mother and my father reconcile,” I don’t simply start praying that. For one thing, I do not know with any sort of certainty that reconciliation is what God is doing in this moment. It may well be the will of God that her parents reconcile, but it may also be that *first* he wants to address something in their character. God doesn’t just put Band-Aids on things; it would be far more like him to first deal with the sin that was poisoning the marriage, and then bring about reconciliation.

I want to live and pray like God’s intimate ally, so I turn my gaze toward God and ask, *What do you want me to pray for her mother and father? Show me what to pray.* Those prayers are far more effective because they are aligned with his will. They are aligned with what he is doing in the situation at this particular moment.

And it is a hard thing to do because the needs that drive us to prayer so often pull on the heartstrings of our deep love and concern for others. As Oswald Chambers warned, we have to be careful we don't simply start praying our sympathies for the person or his need:

Whenever we step back from our close identification with God's interest and concern for others and step into having emotional sympathy with them, the vital connection with God is gone. We have then put our sympathy and concern for them in the way. . . . It is impossible for us to have living and vital intercession unless we are perfectly and completely sure of God. And the greatest destroyer of that confident relationship to God, so necessary for intercession, is our own personal sympathy and preconceived bias. Identification with God is the key to intercession, and whenever we stop being identified with Him it is because of our sympathy with others, not because of sin.¹

A difficult word, but we are pressing into maturity both in our own character and in our partnership with God, and Chambers's admonition must not be ignored. Be careful you do not let your sympathies get in the way! Once again, this is far too common. You've been in those prayer sessions, where someone just launches in and starts praying out of her emotional response to the situation; it is often beautiful and well-intentioned, but it is also typically ineffective. Peter is still in jail. There isn't a cloud on the horizon.

Now yes, yes—*of course we pray moved by love and concern.* Of course we do. I began this book with the Cry of the Heart; it

holds a treasured place in prayer. But we are now talking about the Prayer of Intervention, and the promise we are banking on is that if we are praying in alignment with what God is doing, we will see results. Like the first disciples, our posture needs to be, "Lord—teach us to pray." Not just in a book or sermon, but right here, now, in the moment; teach me how to pray *about this*.

That is why I am careful how I bring my emotion, or my experience, to the need at hand. I don't ignore them; but neither do I let them *dictate* what I am praying. Our testimonies of previous results are valuable, and they may come into play. But this is a very dynamic story we find ourselves in, and as we mature in prayer, let us be careful not to assume this situation is exactly the same as the one before. You will want to ask God what needs to be prayed.

Prayer is not making speeches to God; it is entering into conversational intimacy with him. Father to son or daughter, friend to friend, partner to partner, essential prayer is conversational. It involves a give-and-take. Remember the playful exchange between Ananias and Jesus? "You want me to do *what?*" "Go to this specific house. Place your hands on him." "Wait a second—really?" I understand that prayer speeches are what most of us have seen modeled, but there is a fabulous intimacy and effectiveness available to us as we pause and let God say something in return.

Our God Yearns to Speak

I tell you the truth, the man who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber. The man who enters by the gate is the shepherd of his sheep. The watchman opens the gate for him, and the sheep

Learning to Listen

The first step in learning to hear the voice of God is to ask simple questions.

I find it nearly impossible to hear when I am caught up in drama, stress, or immense pressure. Including urgent time-pressures, as in, *I have to hear and hear NOW!* That is the spiritual equivalent of saying to yourself as you lie down for bed, *I simply MUST get a good night's sleep tonight!* For you know what happens—the stress itself makes it practically guaranteed you won't sleep. Or hear from God, in the case of listening prayer. Do not try to begin with huge and desperate questions like, "Am I supposed to marry this person?" or, "Do you want me to quit my job tomorrow?" or, "Do I have a brain tumor?" God can and does speak into those questions, but starting there is the equivalent of learning to play the piano by expecting yourself to sit down and play a symphony by Mozart. My goodness—let us be kind to ourselves! I find that to hear the voice of God, I must be in a place of quietness and surrender. Beginning with smaller and simpler questions helps me do that.

We've been tracking along with the story of Elijah. Before his triumphant prayer vigil, which called down the rain that broke the three-year drought, the mighty man of God had the famous showdown with the prophets of Baal, resulting in the execution of every one of them. Elijah *then* called down the rain, and after that we find him . . . running for his life from the evil Jezebel. (Don't you just love the humanity of these characters? It makes the Bible so much more real, and their example so much more accessible to us!) God then spoke to Elijah again:

The LORD said, "Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by."

Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake came a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper. (1 Kings 19:11–12)

What a lovely phrase—"a gentle whisper." A "still small voice" as other translations have it. To hear that gentle whisper, we need to calm ourselves down. We quiet our hearts and do our best to shut out all drama. I like to go into a room by myself if I can, or, if I am in my car, I will turn off the radio and let it be my quiet, little sanctuary. I do believe that as we grow in our intimacy with God, our ability to hear his voice grows and we can recognize him speaking in times of great trial. But it is not a good idea to start there or only reach out to hear from him in urgent moments.

Quiet yourself; settle down.

I will then take a simple question to bring before him, something like, "Do you want us to have dinner with the neighbors?" or, "Would you have us reach out to my folks this weekend?" The point being, I choose a matter where there is not a great deal at stake, one where I'm not so personally invested that I fear what God might say. It allows me to sit with the question quietly, with an open heart. As I do, it also helps me to repeat the question to God: "Do you want us to have dinner with the neighbors tonight?" Repeating the question in prayer helps me settle myself before him and stay focused.

MOVING MOUNTAINS

To be clear, I am not listening for an audible voice, as I would if you and I were talking. I am listening for his gentle voice *within*, for that is where Jesus dwells—within our very hearts (Eph. 3:17).

And as I do, I am also keeping my heart open to whatever answer he has for me. This is crucial. If I am really only open to hearing yes or no, if I am not really asking God's counsel but have already decided in my mind what I am going to do, then the whole thing is play-acting. Surrender, true open-handedness, on the question before me is crucial to hearing from God.

That is a beautiful part of this whole process of learning to listen, this question of our openness to whatever he has to say to us. This is forming in us unreserved obedience, which deepens our holiness and deepens our intimacy with God. Surrender prepares us to hear; it opens our hearts and our spirits to God. As we bring to him matters in which we *do* have strong personal desires, the choice to lay it all before him and allow him to say anything he wants to us not only enables us to hear but also gives us confidence that in fact we *have* heard from God. If I know I have been perfectly honest before Jesus, and allowed him to say anything at all to me, then when he does say yes to my heart's desire, I can receive that yes and not think I've made it up myself—for I know I was also willing to hear no.

These are the basic steps: Start with small and simple questions, yes or no questions if possible. Quiet yourself; pull away if you can to a quiet place and shut out all other distractions. Repeat the question as you pray and listen—that helps dial you in and keeps you focused. Bring your heart into a place of surrender.

Now, if I am having a hard time hearing God's voice, or being certain that I *have* heard, I will sometimes "try on" one answer,

then the other. Still in a posture of quiet listening, I will add to my prayers, "Are you saying yes, Jesus? Are you saying you want us to go?" Pause. Listen. "Or are you saying no—you don't want us to go?" Often as we "try on" one answer or another, our spirit can feel the guidance of the Holy Spirit through a confirmation, or a strong sense of reservation.

One other thing I have found helpful as I cultivate conversational intimacy is to first ask God a question I know the biblical answer to. For example, I will ask him, "Do you love me, Jesus?" because I know the Scriptures have answered that, *yes*, beyond all doubt he does. It helps me "warm up" to the practice of listening because Jesus is able to say immediately, *Yes*, or, *Of course I do*. It also helps me address any fears that might come between God and me as I come back to the essential truths of our relationship. I am his son. He loves me. We are good. Then I can move on to specific questions, and, over time, even very sober and weighty questions.

Pray in the Spirit

We are after the kind of prayer that sees results. God promised us results if we pray according to his will, meaning, in alignment with his intentions in this particular situation—not just his general goodwill, or his loving desires, but his plans in the need before us. We *will* see those prayers fulfilled. Certainly we can find a good bit of his will expressed in Scripture, and praying the Scriptures is a very powerful way to pray (we will turn there in just a moment). But the Scriptures also invite us into a conversational intimacy with God, and honestly, each new situation requiring prayer has

so many little variables and puzzles to it we need to hear from God if we are to pray confidently.

Which brings us to the role of the Holy Spirit:

In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God's people in accordance with the will of God. (Rom. 8:26–27 UPDATED NIV)

And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. (Eph. 6:18)

The Holy Spirit is always praying the will of God, so we want to be as tuned in to the Spirit as we can be. (This helps us with our emotions as well; the Spirit is tender toward our emotions but also helps us not to be ruled by them.) The Holy Spirit also empowers our prayers, making them mighty with the power of God. Paul said, "He who unites himself with the Lord is one with him in Spirit" (1 Cor. 6:17), so whenever I possibly can, I begin every prayer with personal consecration:

Jesus—I present myself to you again, right here, right now, in this, for this. I consecrate to you my spirit, soul, and body, my heart, mind, and will. I consecrate to you my gifting, my seeing and perceiving. I consecrate these prayers to you. Wash me with your blood again; cleanse me and renew me. Holy Spirit—come and restore my union with Father and Son; come and fill these prayers.

I don't want to just jump in and start whacking away, only to find myself exhausted thirty minutes later with little to show for it. That can be so discouraging. First, I consecrate and ask the Holy Spirit to fill me. But I don't even start praying after that; second, *I ask the Spirit what to pray*. How he reveals this is as diverse and creative as the God who made the world around us. Sometimes I will simply hear a word, like, *Comfort*. So I will begin to pray for comfort. Sometimes he will bring a scripture to mind, and I will let that be the focus of my prayers. Other times he will reveal something key by a "feeling" or a sensation—I will suddenly feel overwhelmed, or discouraged, or fearful when I wasn't moments before—and in that manner he reveals to me what the person I am praying for is under.

But most of the time, he will speak to me in my heart—that "small, inner voice"—and give me direction as to what to pray. The more accustomed you become to this approach, the more the Spirit can guide your prayers in the moment, as you pray. It becomes one beautiful, intimate partnership of prayer.

Now yes—praying "in the Spirit" does sometimes imply praying with a language given to you by the Spirit, a "prayer language" as it is frequently called. Absolutely. Those are mighty prayers because they are expressions of the Holy Spirit directly to God.

So what shall I do? I will pray with my spirit, but I will also pray with my understanding; I will sing with my spirit, but I will also sing with my understanding. (1 Cor. 14:15 UPDATED NIV)

What is interesting is that when Paul said, "Pray in the Spirit on all occasions," he went on to define what he meant by those words: "with all kinds of prayers and requests" (Eph. 6:18).

Those are *discernible* prayers, made by my mind as well as my spirit. So you see, “praying in the Spirit” does not always mean “pray in a prayer language.” All those prayers Paul prayed for us in Scripture were clearly prayed with normal language because he recounts them to us in normal language. The mighty prayers of Jesus—including those Gethsemane prayers—those, too, were prayers in human language. Spirit-filled and Spirit-led prayer might involve praying with “the tongues of angels,” but in many other occasions it is clearly prayer that can be understood.

So yes, absolutely—I give myself over to the Holy Spirit. I yield myself to him in every way and ask him to fill my prayers. I partner with the Spirit of God in me as I pray, for this is a partnership.

And then, I do what Elijah did—I look for the cloud on the horizon. Is this breaking through? Are we getting some breakthrough here? Does it feel like we’re getting some results? If the person you are praying for is present in the room, ask them, “So, how are you doing now?” It feels risky, but let humility and the desire to learn guide you. Often you will get important feedback like, “When you guys started praying the resurrection over me, I could feel something starting to shift.” Then you hone in on that and take it further.

Jesus—what should I pray in this? will prove revolutionizing to your prayer life. The intimacy you will experience with God will nourish your soul; it is so satisfying you will crave more and more. But your prayers will also be so much more effective. Again, God loves and honors our prayers as children, and as young men and women, but nowadays I rarely pray any other way than from, *Jesus—what do I pray?*