

Listening to God's Voice

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Recently, I was asked to give a talk at a retreat for high school seniors about how prayer and studying the Bible has deepened my relationship with God. As I prepared the talk and prayerfully reflected on my own faith journey, the Holy Spirit shed light on how my reading of Scripture and my prayer life have changed, grown, and deepened over the years. Let me share with you how God has used both my reading of Scripture and my prayer life as the foundation for being able to hear and discern His Voice today.

Getting Started

When I was a freshman in college, my confirmation finally “took,” meaning, I finally could say for myself, “Yes, I want to follow Jesus, my Lord and Savior, and live my life for Him.” I began reading the Bible and praying. Reading the Bible as a person of faith was new to me. While at first I didn’t read the Bible quite like a history book, I also didn’t fully understand that the Bible is God’s revealed Word that has specific messages for me today.

At first, I mostly read the Bible to find out “what happened” and to understand the broad sweep of salvation history. I discovered later, that God used the time I spent slogging through the laws, the “begats,” and strange prophetic messages to lay an important foundation of basic Bible knowledge and understanding for me. Getting an overview of how our Loving Lord has offered salvation to His People throughout the centuries built a crucial knowledge base that has helped me hear and discern the true Voice of the Shepherd when He speaks outside of the Bible to me today.

As for prayer, it too started with the basics, mostly asking, asking, asking. There’s an old country gospel song that says, “Jesus on the main [telephone] line, call Him up and tell Him what you want.” That was a good description of me for many years: “Jesus, please do this or that.” While not all of my prayers were about me—I prayed for the needs and wants of other people in my life, too—the focus of my prayers was on “us,” not Him. I approached God as The Solver of life’s problems more than anything else.

During these first fumbling years of Bible study and prayer I made reading the Bible and prayer a *daily* habit. Almost forty years later now, I can see this daily habit has kept my communication line with the Lord open, and has given me the opportunity to practice recognizing His Voice from among the many other competing voices in our world today.

God Became My Focus

I was baptized in the Spirit during my senior year of college. At that time my prayer life and how I read the Bible began to change slowly but significantly. The first change was a shift in my prayer focus. Up to that point, almost all my attention had been on me and my problems, hopes, and dreams, and on interceding for other people. After I was baptized in the Spirit, my attention *began slowly* to shift to God and to considering what would be pleasing to Him.

The Holy Spirit gave me a deep thirst for *knowing* God, not just knowing about Him. Praying in tongues became part of my daily devotional time. As I prayed in tongues, the Holy Spirit opened up my spirit more and more to hear God’s Voice speaking to me through the Bible and prayer. On occasion the Lord gifted me with moments of deep intimacy when I experienced His incredible love for me. God began to speak to my heart—better said, the Holy Spirit opened my spiritual ears in a way that I could now, on occasion, hear God speaking to my heart.

After I was baptized in the Spirit, I began to read the Bible differently, especially the psalms. I began to pray the psalms as prayers of my own and that helped me develop a prayer vocabulary of adoration, praise, and thanksgiving. I began to thank God for what He was doing in my life and the lives of others instead of mostly asking Him to solve our problems.

In my devotional time I began to sing to the Lord. I began listening to praise and worship music. At that time Maranatha was just beginning and Amy Grant had not yet produced her first Christian album, so there wasn't a lot of the kind of praise and worship we do today. But God put songs in my heart and by the late 70's I began to accompany myself on the guitar, singing to Him and experiencing the joy of praise. Learning how to praise God for who He is and how to thank Him for what He has done opened me up to a whole new focus of knowing and loving the Lord.

Ups and Downs in Learning to Listen to God

During the 1980s I began to write in a journal during my devotional time. I had used a notebook from the beginning to write down Scripture verses that touched my heart or verses that I wanted to memorize. Now I kept a journal to record my prayers to God as well. My prayers to God got longer and longer—often they became very introspective as I tried to sort out the “inner stuff” we all deal with in one way or another. For several years, my introspective prayer focus unintentionally became me, myself, and I again. I was seeking healing and wanted God to set me free from all the painful life baggage I was carrying. However, it was very difficult to focus on God when I was preoccupied with getting physical and inner healing for myself. In reflecting on that time of my life, I now see that my preoccupation with self became a major hindrance to hearing God's Voice because I wasn't focused on Him.

Lately, God has been teaching me that He, better than I or anyone else, knows what needs healing in my life. I need to focus on HIM and enter into His presence through praise, thanksgiving, worship, and adoring the Blessed Sacrament in addition to receiving the sacraments of the Eucharist and Reconciliation. I need to be preoccupied with Him, not my own need for healing or anything else. I am just now learning to trust that God is taking care of all my needs in His own time and in His own way. I am finding that it is much easier to trust Him when I'm focused on Him in worship and praise.

In the mid-90's, I enthroned the Sacred Heart of Jesus in my home and began to spend my daily devotion in Bible reading and prayer, sitting in front of a beautiful picture of the Sacred Heart. As I reflected daily on Jesus' great love for me, I began to be quiet and just sit in God's presence, thanking Him in my heart for His love. Around the same time I began to go to Adoration regularly. There too, I sat quietly in God's presence and listened to Him rather than doing all the talking myself. During the silence I began to hear the Lord speaking wonderful words of love to me. Eventually, I started writing down what I was hearing from Him in my journal. I didn't realize it at the time, but the Lord was training me to hear and recognize His true Voice so that eventually He could use me in charismatic renewal communities.

Limiting God

For more than 30 years now I have been a member of different charismatic prayer groups. Over these years I've heard charismatic Catholic Christians share wonderful Words from God that blessed and encouraged many. Unfortunately, I've also seen some real damage done to individuals and entire prayer communities by people who were giving a false or pseudo “word from God.” My mixed experiences with Words given in prayer groups taught me to be very wary and cautious and to “test the spirits” as 1 John says to do.

In retrospect, for years I was too cautious. In fact, I'd seen enough damage (and been the “victim” of it myself) done by well-meaning but undiscerning people giving “words of the Lord” that I personally shied away from ever giving a prophetic Word myself during a prayer group, much less during a larger charismatic gathering. I definitely didn't want to contribute to someone's hurt in that way, so much so that I didn't even listen for a Word from God in prayer group—even though I heard from God regularly during my devotional time.

But God has a sense of humor and insisted on using me anyway—even if I put definite limits on HOW He could use me! God used my knowledge of His Word in Scripture all the time. I felt comfortable sharing a verse He'd whisper in my ear. Then God began to give me some vivid images for the group that I also felt “safe” sharing. Sharing images got me off the hook—I'd share what I saw and let other people interpret.

God is so gentle and patient with us. He still used me even though I was putting limits on how He could use me.

Listening to God's Voice in Community

Three years ago I began attending the St. Hilary charismatic prayer community in Tiburon. There I became acquainted with a prayer group that used cycles of praise and worship, and listening to and sharing God's Word for us in community [the Guidelines for this prayer group and a description of the cycles of praise and listening can be uploaded from <http://www.sthilary.org/charismatic-prayer-group.html>]. The dual purpose of our prayer group is to speak to God in praise and worship and to LISTEN to what God is saying to us during our prayer meeting. Upon discernment, we then share some of those words with the group.

God used my weekly attendance and participation in this prayer group to develop His Word Gift in me more and more. Under the gentle but firm direction of Msgr. Tarantino, the members of this prayer group were given an effective structure for listening to God speaking to them each week, myself included. At first I shared Words the Lord gave me in both Scripture and image, according to my self-imposed safety zone. Eventually, I began to step out timidly with "I believe the Lord is saying..." kinds of prophetic words. Thanks to some good affirmation from members of the prayer group, I became a bit less timid and a little more confident that the Words I was sharing were in fact words of love and encouragement from the Lord.

About a year and a half ago at a Renewal teaching day, I was asked to pray about becoming a member of the Word Gift team for the NCRC annual conference. Immediately, all of my old fears about hurting people with false "words from God" flooded over me. I explained my reluctance but was assured that the leaders of the Word Gift team would discern all the words before they were given. At the conference, I stepped out in faith a couple of times in that ministry. As I did, the Holy Spirit gave me more confidence, especially as I learned it was really a team effort and that other members of the Body of Christ would help in the discernment process.

During this past year, I have become more open to allowing God to use me in communal prayer gatherings. God still gives me words through Scripture and image as He always has. However, now that I'm more open to sharing a verbal prophetic Word from Him, He is bringing those kinds of words to my mind and mouth more and more. Better said, I'm now listening for them and actually hearing them. My foundation in recognizing and listening to God's Voice through Scripture and knowing Scripture fairly well has given me an internal compass that helps me discern what I am hearing. This past year I have served in the Word Gift ministry at the San Francisco Renewal's monthly First Friday charismatic healing Masses. There too I have gained valuable experience in listening to God's Voice in a community setting. I have grown in my confidence and trust that God will work through any "deficits" in my delivery or if I "miss" and share a word that was either meant for me personally, or was just my own pious, Christian sounding message--words that sound good but are not from the Lord. Working as a team with others who can discern with me and correct me if I am "off" has been very important for increasing my own confidence and refining my discernment in testing a specific word.

Where Can We Go From Here?

As you can see, God has used the different phases of my life to develop spiritual ears that are still very much learning to listen. As I've outlined, learning to listen to and discern God's Voice didn't happen overnight nor was it a straight path to ministry in His Kingdom. My faith journey has had a lot of bumps and twists along the way as well as a few periods of smoother sailing, especially when I listened and obeyed and took my focus off of me. But believe me—if God can teach *me* to listen, He can teach anyone!

Maybe for you it's a matter of finding some quiet time in your daily routine. We live in a noisy world, often with music or the TV blaring in our homes and cars. I've found it's really important to unplug on a regular basis and just be quiet. Of course God can talk to us whenever He wants to—but I've found I'm not always listening. How can we create an environment, even for fifteen or twenty minutes a day, which will increase our chance of listening to what God is saying?

If you have never gone to Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, give it a try. If your parish doesn't have an Adoration chapel or a time that you can go to, find out the different Adoration days and times in your local area (Google it). Or find a church that is open at a time you can go, if only to sit in the quiet of the church, possibly in front of the tabernacle. Yes, the Lord is everywhere, but for many people, the quiet of a church makes it easier to sense His presence and love.

Maybe it would be helpful for you to develop the habit of reading some Scripture every day. Sometimes I just read—slowly—the readings for the day. If God touches me in the first reading, I may never get to the gospel that day because I've found I need to focus on what God is speaking to me at the moment rather than rushing through a reading agenda. Many bible devotionals exist to help people who are just getting started.

Have you ever tried to write down your prayers in a journal? If you like to write or have an introverted side, this might be a perfect way for you to grow closer to the Lord. Remember to stop every now and then and let the Lord speak to you. Prayer should be a two-way channel of communication, not just one-way.

If you have not committed to going regularly to a charismatic prayer group, find one. In the San Francisco Archdiocese alone there are dozens of prayer groups meeting throughout the week. You can find a list of them on this website [sfspirit.com]. When you get to the prayer group, ask the Lord to speak to you, and then listen for His Voice. Thoughts that come to your mind may well be from Him. If in doubt, run them by the prayer group leadership afterward. Ask for help in discerning what you're hearing. God created us to be in community with one another, not to follow Him and minister to others on our own.

Go to larger charismatic events whenever possible. Every time I go to a First Friday Mass or the NCRC annual charismatic conference in May or a teaching day or a local event like the San Francisco charismatic Holy Spirit Conference in September, I learn something new, grow closer to the Lord, and learn to hear His Voice more accurately.

God wants all of us to grow deeper in love with Him and to minister to one another in love with the gifts He gives to us. I rejoice that He calls each of us by name and invites all of us to communicate with Him. And I also rejoice that He doesn't leave us to figure it all out by ourselves. Instead, He's given us one another. Each of us has a different set of spiritual gifts, so that we can together build up His Body and be His Church, a sign of love, joy, and peace to our world today. Praise the Lord!

Resources

The following are great resources that give guidelines and practical tips on how to grow in listening to God and discerning His Voice:

The Word Among Us. This has the daily readings for the Church like *Magnificat* (and is cheaper). It also has spirit-filled reflective articles. Most of the *Word Among Us (WAU)* publishing staff are charismatic and the articles reflect that perspective. They also publish Catholic bible studies and other devotional guides that are spirit-filled. Their website is: www.wau.org

Bro. Bob Canton, *The Gift of Prophecy*, can be uploaded from this website under left sidebar "Articles, New" at <http://www.sfspirit.com/new-articles.html>

María José Cantos de Ortiz, *Practicing the Charism of Prophecy in the Charismatic Renewal*
<http://www.sfspirit.com/teachings.html>

Fr. Peter Sanders, C.O., *The Prophetic Ministry*, is a multiple CD teaching on prophetic (Word Gift) ministry including how to hear and discern the Voice of God, how to deliver words correctly, guidelines for the

prophet, etc. This CD set and others can be purchased from his New Pentecost ministries website:
<http://www.newpentecost.org/bookstore.html>

Stephen Binz, *Conversing with God in Scripture*. This short book is about *Lectio divina*, an ancient Benedictine practice of reading Scripture prayerfully. This is a very practical book about how to read a passage of Scripture with a listening ear and how to let the Voice of God speak through Scripture and meet our needs today. This book is usually featured at www.wau.org in their books section.