

Using “Listening to God”

The material in this booklet is reprinted with the kind and generous permission of Scripture Union. The author is Rosemary Green, housewife, counsellor, writer and speaker. The ten different segments use selected Bible passages to help us to focus on the listening aspect of prayer.

You may find it useful to have a large notebook to use as a journal. Just between you and God, freely write your thoughts, your feelings, your reflections on scripture, and your prayers. Another useful tool would be a book of old hymns or modern songs for reflective prayer.

This booklet could be used in personal devotions in the following ways:

1. Use this as a personal follow-up to a prayer workshop such as the Anglican Fellowship of Prayer’s Power House of Prayer Workshop.
2. This is an excellent framework for those wishing to begin journaling.
3. It could be a good Lenten discipline. The individual segments could be spread out over the period of Lent.

While these guided meditations were primarily intended for use in personal devotions they could also be used by small groups.

1. For an 'at home' prayer group study, each member would work at it separately at home and insights would be shared when the group meets. Sharing at this level can draw a group closer.
2. This group of studies could be used in a Lenten Quiet Day. Perhaps four of the six segments could be used. Leaders might consider sharing stories that illustrate each of the segments.

A helpful book to read about the topic is “The Joy of Listening to God” by Joyce Huggett (InterVarsity Press).

LISTENING TO GOD

9 IN OUR TURMOIL

It may seem easy to be aware of God’s message when life is good. But what about the tough times, when circumstances batter us, or when depression and inner turmoil threaten to swamp us? How can we hear God then?

Write down how you are feeling now. Don't be afraid of any of the negatives; the Lord wants us to be honest with him. Then choose one of these passages, according to your mood.

- ✦ If you are depressed, read Lamentations 3:1-33.
- ✦ If you are afraid, read Psalm 56.
- ✦ If you are lonely and rejected, read Psalm 69:1-18,29-36.
- ✦ If you are feeling guilty, read Psalm 51.
- ✦ If you are angry with God, read Job 10:1-22,;38:1-11; 42:1-6.

First see how far you identify with the writer's expression of unhappiness. Then find the point when he turns to acknowledge God's goodness, and choose whether to stay with the writer as he turns to God who is reliable, loving, rescuing. It is as if we are in a dark, gloomy room. We do not have to leave the room to find Jesus; instead we invite one who knew much suffering in his human life to come in with us, to help us clear the debris and then escape.

*Just as I am, though tossed about
With many a conflict, many a doubt;
Fightings and fears within, without,
O Lamb of God, I come.*

(C. Elliot)

8 IN OUR WORLD

Early one morning I was sitting beside a lake. The trees and bushes were clearly reflected in the still water, and I prayed that my life might be a clear reflection of Jesus. Then I saw that this can only happen if I am still and quiet before God.

Jesus constantly used everyday events and objects in his teaching: camels, donkeys, farming, lamps, burglars, fishing.

Jeremiah 18:1-12

First, verses 1-4. Think of Jeremiah aware of the Lord's direction. 'Go to the potter's house.' Quietly, patiently, he watched the potter at work. 'Lord, what do you want to say to me through this man and his work?' Think how the clay on the wheel takes shape; the mistakes, the new starts, the detailed embellishments.

Now read verses 5 -12, and pick one verse that speaks to you. My own choice is verse 6. 'Rosemary, can I not do with you as this potter does?' What sort of clay am I? Do I let the heavenly power mould me? Reflect on your selected verse, and on the whole image of the potter and the clay.

Stop and listen to the sounds around you. Let each noise you hear suggest a way to pray. Now or later, alone or with a small group, focus on some part of natural creation (a tree, a flower, a cloud); or pick up some man-made object that has no obvious Christian meaning. Think about its origins, its looks, its use, the words written on it, the train of thought it sets up, and ask God to speak to you through it. Then respond in prayer to what God says.

1 LISTENING TO GOD

For the first study just one verse is used as a source of meditation.

Psalm 46:10

Chew over each word or tiny phrase, as a cow chews the cud. Quietly, prayerfully, let God guide your train of thought, 'Be still...' It is God's command.

Be Still ... Ask him to quiet any restlessness in you. His peace is like the tranquillity at the bottom of the ocean, unchanging however stormy the water's surface.

And know ... God wants US to be sure of him and his character deep in our being, not just in theory.

That I am God ...I will be exalted ...Ponder each word. Read the rest of the psalm to enrich your meditation, but continue to concentrate on the one verse.

Speak, Lord, in the stillness, while I wait on You. Quiet my heart to listen, in expectancy.



2 IN THE QUIET

The story of Martha, tense and busy, and of Mary, quietly sitting at Jesus' feet, is a familiar one. Have you ever thought about the scene as if you were one of the sisters? First, read the story as an observer.

Luke 10:38-42

Now choose to 'be' one of the sisters and, either in your mind or on paper, re-write the story from the person's point of view. Martha starts, 'As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to our village and I opened our home to him. My sister Mary...' or Mary says, 'As Jesus came to our village, my sister Martha opened our home to him. I sat at the Lord's feet.' Finish one of the accounts.

Next imagine that you are the same person that evening, reflecting on what happened and how you felt. Write 'your' journal for the day. See what this shows you about your own life and your relationship with the Lord. Then turn these thoughts into prayer.

Another time we might look at this event from Jesus' perspective. What did he think? How did he feel? How did he pray?

*Open our eyes, Lord, we want to see Jesus,
To reach out and touch him, and say that we love him.
Open our ears, Lord, and help us to listen.
Open our eyes, Lord, we want to see Jesus.*

(Bob Cull © Maranatha! Music 1976. Used with permission)

7 EXTOL HIM!

The psalms frequently show us an encounter between an individual and God. Today we can make this our psalm, to use as a tool for praise and prayer.

Psalm 95

Write or read verses 1 and 2 in the first person. 'I want to sing for joy to the Lord; I will shout aloud to the Rock of my salvation.' Finish verse 2, then stop to sing or read a joyful hymn or song of praise. Shout aloud 'Hosanna!' (which means save) as the Jews did on the first Palm Sunday. Thank God for the good things in your life, even if there is also pain and difficulty. Then praise him again.

Go back to verses 3 to 5, addressing the words directly to God. 'For you, Lord, are a great God...' Then reflect on his power in creation.

Verses 6 and 7. Write these 'I' to 'you', 'I will worship you and bow down.' Kneel, and speak to your Shepherd.

Continue to write the last verses as 'I to You'. They are an opportunity:

- ✠ to ponder the reality of God's wrath - a doctrine that sometimes we neglect in our materialistic twenty-first century;
- ✠ to confess the times we have ignored God when he has spoken to us through his word or through our own consciences; and
- ✠ to resolve to listen to him and to obey.

Lord, please help me to live this week in the light of this psalm.

6 AN INNER VOICE

The means of communication we have considered the last three days may seem to be rather specialised, 'only for the really spiritual people.' Sometimes God speaks, even today, in an audible voice, as he did to attract young Samuel's attention (1 Sam 3). This began Samuel's lifelong habit of listening to the Lord. My own experience is that God often speaks through a 'nudge'. If I want to please him, and if I flash frequent prayers about life's details, then his thoughts can readily invade my thoughts. Often I am unsure if an idea has been generated by observation, by my own ideas or by the Spirit's prompting - or by all three! Recently our house was for sale. The price offered was disappointingly low, but I sensed God's nudge to accept it. Greed tempted me to stay silent. but the jigsaw of events after the sale showed how right it was to obey the thought. Now read about Philip.

Acts 8:1-6, 26-40

Persecution in Jerusalem took Philip to Samaria, where he was kept busy in a highly successful evangelistic and healing mission. Suddenly an angel re-directed him to the desert. He obeyed, and that obedient attitude kept him open to the Holy Spirit's prompting about what to do next (29).

Imagine yourself as Philip, praying about the day's events and the different ways the Spirit had been at work.

Let these thoughts stimulate you to pray about the day behind you and the day ahead of you.

Lord, please make me sensitive and obedient to your nudge.

3 GOD SPEAKS DIRECTLY

Some of us may have been in a church meeting when a message has been spoken that purports to come directly from God. We may even find words coming into our own minds that are not of our initiative. What are we to make of these experiences? Is God speaking or are human thoughts claiming divine inspiration? Simeon's example shows us some of the principles we can use to test the validity of such experiences.

Luke 2:25-38

Verse 25 Simeon's character, expectancy and spirituality

Verse 26 His habit of listening to the Holy Spirit

Verse 27 His obedience to the Spirit's prompting

Verse 28 His praise of God

Verse 29 His personal, quiet trust in God

Verse 32 His message was in accord with Scripture

Verse 33 The way the hearers reacted

Verse 38 Another confirmed the message

Joseph and Mary 'marvelled' (33). This word implies a mixture of awe, joy, astonishment and acceptance. When we hear a message that is truly from the Lord we can say 'Wow! I sense in my spirit that God is speaking', even if we do not fully understand its meaning. Then we need to do as Mary did in verse 19. We ponder, and we pray for further enlightenment from the Spirit about our response.

Ask God if there is any word he wants to give you directly.

Read Jeremiah 23:21-35, with its warning against false prophets.

4 THROUGH VISIONS

Cornelius and Peter were about thirty-three miles apart at the start of this chapter. God gave each of them a vision that was to link their lives, with momentous consequences.

Acts 10:1-27

Using these verses, together with your knowledge about Peter, write down some of their similarities and differences.

	CORNELIUS	PETER
His position in life		
His character		
How the vision came		
How clear the message was		
His initial response		
The action he took		

Reflect on how, when or to whom God speaks.
How should we respond?

When Cornelius had told Peter why he had sent the messengers (30-33) Peter explained the gospel at this 'evangelistic' home meeting' (34-43). Read verses 44-48 to see the unexpected outcome of two visions that stimulated obedient response.

You may say 'I'm not the sort of person to get visions!' But understanding the vision in the broadest sense, try these steps, and you may have a surprise!

1. Ask God to be Lord of your God-given imagination.
2. Think how you might draw a picture of yourself and Jesus.
3. Focus on that mental picture as you pray. You may find that he takes that 'sketch', colours it, turns it into a movie, and speaks to you through it.

5 THROUGH DREAMS

A Nigerian Christian had a vivid dream about his imminent journey. At a recognisable point on the road he was attacked by bandits and killed. Next day he took particular care as he approached the spot; the bandits were indeed there, but his watchfulness enabled him to escape and live to tell the tale.

God still speaks through dreams, as he did in the Old and New Testaments. One Joseph needed to mature in wisdom before he could make good use of dreams (Gen 37:1-11; 40:1-23). Another Joseph was wholly obedient when God spoke to him as he slept (Matt 1:18-25; 2:13-15, 19-21). In today's reading we focus on Jacob as he travelled from his cheated, murderous brother towards his unknown uncle Laban.

Genesis 28:10-22

Reflect on:

- † Jacob's probable state of mind and emotions (10,11).
- † The vividness of the dream (12,13).
- † The way God spoke to him about himself and about the future (13-15).
- † Jacob's reaction (16,17) and his response (18-22).

Sometimes dreams are clearly God's initiative to convey a message. More often they are an indication of our own subconscious. God can speak to us through these dreams, too. Pray about any half-remembered dream and ask 'Is there anything you want to show me through that dream?' Deliberately take the dream as the start of a 'prayer picture' and let the Spirit control it and use it.