

"The real 'work' of prayer is to become silent and listen to the voice that says good things about me. . . . To gently push aside and silence the many voices that question my goodness and to trust that I will hear the voice of blessing—that demands real effort."

HENRI NOUWEN

LISTENING PRAYER

Desire	to quiet the inner and outer noise so I can open my heart and listen for God's voice
Definition	Listening prayer allows God to set the agenda for prayer and responds to the word that is given.
Scripture	<p>"The LORD came and stood there, calling as at the other times, 'Samuel! Samuel!'" Then Samuel said, 'Speak, for your servant is listening.'" (1 Samuel 3:10)</p> <p>"Give ear and come to me; hear me, that your soul may live." (Isaiah 55:3)</p> <p>"He who has ears, let him hear." (Matthew 11:15)</p> <p>"My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me." (John 10:27)</p> <p>"Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me." (Revelation 3:20)</p>
Practice Includes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • responding to God's agenda for prayer • reading a Scripture and listening to what "lights" up, letting this be the focus of prayer • notice when a song or reading grabs at the heart; don't move on; listen for what God is saying at that moment and respond • listening to God rather than talking at God
God-Given Fruit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • prayers that don't dictate to God • learning to recognize God's voice • trusting God to speak—in God's own time • listening skills • a more quiet center

LISTENING PRAYER

MARK THIBODEAUX SUGGESTS in the *Armchair Mystic* that prayer evolves in four stages:

- talking *at* God—the lovely childlike prayers that are filled with lists of thank yous, straightforward asks and memorized graces and going-to-bed prayers
- talking *to* God—we find our own words and learn to monologue and intercede from our hearts about our desires and needs
- listening *to* God—the understanding that prayer is a dialogue that requires listening to God's thoughts and not just my own
- being *with* God—the basis of contemplative prayer, which rests in God's presence without concern for what prayer activity is going on

When our minds frenetically jump from tasks to worries, from demands to disappointments and from fears to escape habits, we need a discipline that quiets us and helps us listen for God's voice. Listening prayer turns us away from elaborate internal commentaries, noisy inner chaos and catastrophic thinking (which makes things worse). It invites us to let go of dramatic internal dialogues and listen to a voice besides our own or that of the evil one. In the wilderness Jesus didn't engage Satan in an internal debate about the merits of God's plan. Neither did Jesus follow his own mind into worst-case scenarios. Jesus listened to God's own words, which provided strength to face temptations. God words shaped Jesus' responses: "Man does not live on bread alone but in every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD" (Deuteronomy 8:3; see Matthew 4:4).

No one can conjure up God or force God to speak. So, listening prayer is never in my control. When I say, like Eli, "Speak, LORD, for your servant *is* listening" (1 Samuel 3: 9-10), I will be in a place to hear *when* God speaks. Developing an ear that recognizes God's voice and that listens to your life opens up the possibility of hearing from God through anyone or anything. Practice listening to God and you will develop a heart tuned to the pitch and timbre of God's word to you

God could speak through *lectio divina* (see the "Lectio Divina/Devotional Reading" entry for more information) as we let Scripture, rather than our own thoughts, determine the direction of prayer. God could invite us to prayer through the voice of a friend, through nature, through our own reactions and interactions.

Don't worry about constant inattention in listening prayer. The mind is designed to make connections and wander. That's why we can zone out when someone is speaking or even while we are reading. Rather than judging ourselves as a miserable failure on the basis of inner detours, humbly return listening attention to Jesus.

The more we practice turning from self-judgment to Jesus, the quieter our center becomes. Returning to Jesus is how we learn to wait attentively. If nothing seems to be happening in our prayer, if God seems silent, we return to the truth that we are not separate from God. We may not "hear" a specific word, but God is near, closer than our own breath, abiding deep within. Our part is to faithfully show up, seek, knock and refuse to engage an inner dialogue with our distractions.

Persevering in listening prayer is an act of trust that God is present beyond the words (or in the words) waiting to bask in our attention.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Consider your own listening skills. When do you interrupt? How alert are you to body language? When you want to add a thought to a conversation, how attentive are you to what is actually being said? How are you with eye contact? Where might you need to grow in listening skills?
2. What happens to you when you try to listen to God and feel you don't hear anything? What inner dialogue do you engage in?
3. How might listening to Jesus instead of your catastrophic thinking impact your life?

SPIRITUAL EXERCISES

1. Practice *lectio divina* as a form of listening prayer. Read a short portion of Scripture and listen for a word or phrase to light up. Let that set the agenda for your prayer.
2. Listen to worship music. What captures your heart? Repeat the words to yourself. Hear Jesus speaking these words to you. Let the words rest inside you and quiet your heart.
3. When you start to pass judgment on your praying and listening skills, stop. Turn to Jesus and imagine how happy he is that you have turned back to him rather than engage in a diatribe against the one he loves. Listen to the loving words Jesus says to you.
4. This week practice not interrupting. Just listen. What do you learn about someone that you never knew before because you listened deeply.

RESOURCES ON LISTENING PRAYER

Armchair Mystic by Mark E. Thibodeaux
Listening to God by Joyce Huggett
Prayer and Listening by Jan Johnson