

Hearing God: Learning to Listen to the Spirit of God
A Four Week Summer Session for All
By Brad Bailey

Session Two
Developing Our Spiritual “Hearing”

INTRODUCTION

I want to begin by reaffirming the spirit of this class... by stating again:

We all hear God. The basis of this class is my confidence in that belief.

You hear God. That is why you are here.

I **also believe** that the nature of hearing God is one in which we can tend to be **too definitive** or **too dismissive**.

It's really common within a church community to have some who speak of hearing God is very **common and confident ways**...and **others who wonder if they ever really hear** God speak to them.

So I want to say at this very point of welcome... **these weeks will serve across that spectrum.**

This class is not a test of your faith...it is a time to enjoy God's presence. With that at the forefront... let's take a moment to pray...and welcome God to make this real.

PRAY

God ... we stop to embrace that we are each a spiritual being... equally spiritual because it is what you created.

We welcome your presence.... as it's own gift.

And amidst that presence... we welcome you to speak.

In our first session I noted that we will divide our time between understanding and experience... with the first half being teaching from Scripture and experience...and the second half that experiencing the process of listening. This evening will be a little different...with each half of our time beginning with some thoughts that will launch into some exploration.

Last week... some understanding of how God speaks. A central focus was considering that...

God is Spirit, and as such, God “speaks” both through and beyond the boundaries of our physical and rational nature. Hearing God involves developing an inner dialogue between our spirit and the Spirit of God.

God generally speaks to us by the Spirit's inner voice that is distinct from our own thoughts, an inner image, that upon reflection or further revelation, offers meaning, a feeling that comes upon us (such as a peace, faith, etc), or a prompting that directs us.

The Spirit may also communicate through bringing a word from Scripture to mind, a dream or vision, words given by another, and in the context of praying for others, sympathetic sensations in your body.

What to listen for? Whatever tends to come from outside your own current ideas and thoughts. Mark Virkler describes this as “Spontaneous thoughts that light upon our mind”

This week... we'll consider understanding our part in hearing God.

How Can We “Listen” to God?

How Can I Develop My Spiritual “Hearing”?

The very word “listening” becomes more dynamic as we mature in life.

When we are a child...and a parent says...“Are you listening to me?” We think... “Of course...your yelling... I’m not deaf.”

Many years later... if a spouse or friend yells at us... “Are you even listening to me...do you hear what I’m saying...are you deaf?” We have some sense of what they’re saying.

When we’re young we have a basic sense of hearing involving the auditory nature of sound waves... something creates sound and something receives sound.

As we get older... we begin to realize that there is a difference between mere capacity and actual connection.

If someone asks how well you hear other people... we have a sense that there are levels of hearing. There is the nature of basic sound waves reaching your receptors....and then there is how well you take those in and grasp what they mean.

This leads to the idea of becoming “**active listeners.**” The point is that we are often very passive in listening.... we assume if we can hear sounds... we are connected.... but there is actually a lot that can hinder connection.

There is the nature of our **focus**...and of our **openness to receive.**

In some similar ways, hearing God involves our focus and posture.... being centered and open.

Listening spiritually, like all listening, is served by slowing down, focusing, and being open and receptive.

Jesus had developed a life of communion with his Father in heaven that led his disciples to ask him... to teach them to pray. And as many may recall... he gladly shared some very instructive words. Jesus said...

“And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. ⁶ But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.” - Matthew 6:5-6

These are very instructive words.

When they ask Jesus to teach them to pray like he prays...he says it begins with focus. The religious leaders were focused on impressing others... on those they could see. But the prayer where God meets us is the prayer that is focused on him. (His point is not that we can’t pray with others... he often did...but that we stop and focus on God.)

Often... the first challenge we face is hurry. When we are in a rush we don’t really engage the presence of other people...nor God. Our rushed nature is generally set on another goal... somewhere else. So Jesus teaches us to...

1. Stop and become present to God.

Dallas Willard became renown around the world for recapturing the spiritual life. His book *The Divine Conspiracy* was read around the world. Dallas had set forth a fresh call to become more

like Christ by actually following the pattern and way of life of Christ. A very respected leader once asked Dallas: "What do I need to do to be spiritually healthy?"

More Bible reading? More prayer? More fasting?

Dallas said:

"You must ruthlessly eliminate hurry from your life." - Dallas Willard

The man responded..."Okay, I've written that one down. That's a good one. Now what else is there?"

"There is nothing else," Dallas said. "You must ruthlessly eliminate hurry from your life."

That may sound good to some of us... and yet a bit hard to grasp. We don't often think of hurry as an issue that is related to our own nature... as much as simply the circumstances around us.

But as one writer described...

"Hurry is a symptom of exaggerated self-importance and trying to do too much. When we're unhurried we are able to heed the word of God, "Cease striving and know that I am God" (Psalm 46:10). Instead of rushing or worrying about what we need to do we can focus on what God is doing right now and join him in his kingdom that is righteousness, peace, and joy (Romans 14:17)." - Bill Gaultiere [1]

The challenge is really one of focus. If I am honest with myself... I begin to realize that my hurry is not simply about getting more done... but about being present in what is being done.

It's been noted,

"This does not mean we will never be busy. Jesus often had much to do, but He never did it in a way that severed the life-giving connection between Him and His Father. He never did it in a way that interfered with His ability to give love when love was called for. Here's the key thing you can't do in a hurry: love God or love others. Love and hurry are fundamentally incompatible. Hurry is the great enemy of the spiritual life... because it kills love." - Dan Kopp [2]

It strikes me that Jesus reflects just that. He lived in relationship to His Father... and never seemed to be driven.

This was expressed in a more provocative way by an Asian leader who has traveled the world extensively...and concluded...

"Love has its speed. It is a spiritual speed. It is a different kind of speed from the technological speed to which we are accustomed. It goes on in the depth of our life, whether we notice or not, at three miles an hour. It is the speed we walk and therefore the speed the love of God walks." - Kosuke Koyama, Three Mile an Hour God

For some of us... this is a provocative thought. We live amidst a world that seems to thrive on doing more... and therefore doing things faster. What if that pace actually reflects something vain ...something that is not aligned with God?

The most significant step in developing our ability to listen to God may be to slow down and become present to God.

This is what many of the early church monastic leaders grasped...and why they developed spiritual disciplines to help them stop and center themselves... to stop and become present with God. Thomas Keating describes centering prayer as "a way of saying 'Here I am.'"

"Centering prayer is not a way of turning on the presence of God. Rather, it is a way of saying "Here I am." The next step is up to God. It is a way of putting yourself at God's

disposal; it is God who determines the consequences.” - Thomas Keating, Open Mind, Open Heart

2. Recognize the profoundly distinct nature of God... and entrust ourselves to Him.

In our common attempts to pray... whose presence do we generally sense to be most aware of?(Our own)

Whose presence is actually far more vast? (God's...and vastly so).

That helps us to appreciate that....

Listening to God involves a posture that recognizes the absolutely distinct nature of who God is.

When Jesus provided a model of prayer... it began.

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done.” – Matt. 6:9-10

The first thing you do when you seek to align yourself with God in prayer...is recognize who He is.

Any communication begins by recognizing the reality of another as another...as not merely ourselves. The truth is that we can be so consumed within ourselves that we can talk with another person...and never really engage with them...because we never take in the distinct otherness of who they are. They can become just a means in which to hear ourselves.

If we want to hear God... we must stop and recognize who we are speaking to...and allow ourselves to recognize He is holy... which means set apart... over all. Our human existence lives within His reign.

“To live in the presence of God on a continuous basis can become a kind of fourth dimension to our three-dimensional world, forming an invisible but real background to everything that we do or that happens in our lives.” - Thomas Keating [3]

Our human nature is one of dependency. When Christ came to dwell with us... this is what he modelled.

John 5:17, 19

Jesus said to them... "I tell you the truth, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does."

"The power of prayer is not that of pulling God's strings, but of allowing ourselves to come into movement with God. We can move in the authority of Christ as we operate out of the power of our submission to the will of heaven as he did."

While we can and should come to God with our needs and requests.... our ultimate posture should not be coercion but alignment.

If I throw out a boat-hook from the boat and catch hold of the shore and pull, do I pull the shore to me, or do I pull myself to the shore? Prayer is not pulling God to my will, but the aligning of my will to the will of God."

This means submitting our ideas... and opinions... and preferences.

And this leads to...

3. Be Open: Receptive and Responsive

The ultimate goal... the most fundamental question we can consider...is "How open and receptive to God am I?"

Do I want God... do I want what He may say... what He may impart....what He may want to do? And a more challenging way to consider that...is to consider what we have done with what he has called us to do.

Luke 16:10-11

"Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much, and whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with much. So if you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches? (Also Luke 19:17; Matt. 18:6)

If a parent is talking to a child... and the child really only wants to hear what they want... and isn't receptive to what they may need to hear.... a parent can intuitively sense that expressing more will only further their negative response. The point is that our current responsiveness defines how much we are really able to hear.

Often we only think the big steps in life are valued...but it's actually that which we deem "little" that is the foundation for everything else.

So we do well to ask ourselves... do our lives reflect a basis for which God should speak? Are we responsive to what we have heard...to what God has spoken?

Have we been seeking to care about those we live with... and next to... our family and neighbors?

In managing the resources we have been entrusted with...have we shown faithfulness and generosity?

Time to Listen

Considering three options...

1. Moving this from end of part 1 to here for time sake "Sharing what we face: Join in groups of 3 and share what you have recognized.

...or Lectio Divina below but with extended Centering Prayer

Listening to the Spirit Speak through Scripture (Lectio Divina)

As many have experienced, God will speak to us through Scripture in a way that is often personal. The Spirit may illuminate a particular word or phrase... and speak afresh into our souls. The early church enjoyed the common practice of what is often referred to as "Lectio Divina," which is Latin for divine reading, spiritual reading, or "holy reading." It involves choosing a Scripture and bringing ourselves before God to speak through it.

Bring ourselves before God. - We begin with taking time to slow down... sit comfortably... bring ourselves before God... and prepare to listen.

Listen to the Scripture – allow a word or phrase to be illuminated. - The Scripture is read slowly ...often twice. Take in each portion of the reading, constantly listening for the "still, small voice" of one word or phrase that somehow says, "I am for you today." The phrase or word may not jump out, but reveal itself slowly. Choose that word or phrase...and let it speak afresh to your soul.

Let the word or phrase speak. - Listen to the Scripture slowly another time...and this time contemplate what God is inviting you to do. What do you think is being communicated, what is God trying to tell you, what is revealing itself through scripture?

Psalm 23:1-6

¹ The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not be in want. ² He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, ³ he restores my soul. He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. ⁴ Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me. ⁵ You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. ⁶ Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.

PART 2

Face Any Obstacles to Being Present with God

NOTE: I want to share some points that will be valuable only to the degree we actually will explore them personally. So as we move through these points... let's make this the start of some self-reflection.

Note what speaks to you....by at least circling it...or jotting a note.

Then we will share a bit about what God is helping us to consider.

How we hear another is significantly affected by relational dynamics that may lie within us and between us... dynamics often at work before we even try to "listen." [4] [5]

Let's consider these types of dynamics. If we identify with some...it gives us the ability to gain freedom from them... and open up our relationship with God...and our relating to God.

- **Self-Rejection (unworthiness)**

- Some of you are not sure you should hear from God
- All of us from time to time can feel this way

Sometimes coming and being STILL before God forces us to face ourselves. When we stand before the light of God's presence... we see both God more clearly....and ourselves. It can be a moment in which we face our shame and sin... which the enemy can use to condemn us. But that is not what lies as the end.

"Nothing is more helpful to reduce pride than the actual experience of self-knowledge. If we are discouraged by it, we have misunderstood its meaning." - Thomas Keating

It can also be an opportunity to allow the love and mercy of God to shine on us.

It is that mercy which can stand in the reality of humility and confidence. We can join in the spirit of the Psalmist:

O LORD, you have searched me and you know me. You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar. Such knowledge is too wonderful from me, too lofty for me to attain. For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you for I am fearfully and wonderfully made; **your works are wonderful**, I know that full well. Psalm 139:1-2, 6, 13-14

Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the MOST HOLY PLACE by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, **let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith**, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water. Hebrews 10:19-22

We are God's wonder...and God's redeemed. We must bring ourselves before God as those who represent His wonderful creation...and his effective redemption.

- **Self-Reliance**

We can't come to God if we are still playing the part of God... operating almost exclusively in reliance on ourselves.

Some of us simply feel responsible for everything...and we can become problem solvers to a fault... unable to trust what the Father is doing. In many ways we are playing God and will let Him know if we need Him to step in.

God doesn't want us to become passive creatures...who just wait for Him to save us. Far from it. ***God created us with the capacity to be responsible...to be activists... but activists who understand our limitations... and live out of a dynamic dependency on God.***

- **Unresolved Disappointment**

Sometimes we may have an unresolved disappointment in our lives... that has formed an unspoken protection from further expectations that could lead to disappointment. At some level...we may be avoiding trusting God as a means of avoiding the unresolved disappointed.

Some of us have a past prayer that God didn't seem to respond to. We went through, and may still be going through, real suffering... not sure where God was, or is in it... so we're avoidant of seeking him

It's not easy to work out the deep disappointments in life... but it is absolutely vital that we stop and loosen the protective clothing we have bound ourselves in.

- Sometimes this will involve God revealing something about the circumstances. There you may discover what the apostle Paul did, having entreated God 3 times... "MY GRACE IS SUFFICIENT FOR YOU"
- Often, I have found that it is a matter of getting beyond my need to understand. The truth is that I am a finite creature... and I cannot presume to understand the infinite.

So if I was praying for someone to be healed...and they die....I can stop praying... to avoid any future disappointment... but that is a choice that will ultimately bind me within a word that demands understanding the infinite...and that will prove to be a very small world. So I choose to share my heart with God...and accept there is more than I can understand.

- **Unconfessed Sin**

- ***We are never likely going to be aware of all our unconscious wrongs. However, at any given time there may be significant issues in our thoughts or behavior that cause us to avoid the light of God's presence...and the working of God's Spirit. We may still come to God in more ritualistic forms to pray and worship... but in a manner which avoids being truly present before God.***
- What we are hiding in the dark will want to avoid the light. We will simply have ambivalence in our desire to meet with God//or hear God.
- Like with a friendship or marriage, when you both know there's an issue between you that needs to be discussed... UNTIL IT DOES, IT'S AWKWARD.
- Until we overcome our avoidance... we will become spiritually lost...never real.

- **Unresolved Conflict / Unforgiveness with Others**

- God knows that as we hold onto the wrong of others as unforgivable, we can't at the same time expect to enter His mercy and forgiveness.
- To refuse to forgive... is to refuse God.
- Sometimes we're projecting our own shame, and therefore refusing our very need for God's mercy on ourselves.

Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift. - Matthew 5:23-24

For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins" - Matt. 6:14-15

Some Initial Self-Reflection: Take a few minutes to initially look at what has stood out within your own challenges of being present before God.

Time to Share and Listen

Sharing what we face: Join in groups of 3 and share what you have recognized. After each individual shares, take some time to prayer over them... slowing down to listen for anything you sense God may be communicating.

Between sessions as able and led:

- Begin to create daily time of stopping and becoming present to God. See Him alongside you (He is Immanuel, God with you), and staying tuned to spontaneity all day long. The Bible calls this abiding in Christ (see John 15:4) or "praying without ceasing" (1 Thess. 5:17).
- Review and reflect on the points from Session One.
- Explore more from potential "Additional Resources."

Additional Resources:

To speak about how we relate to and hear from God involves some degree of diversity in experience and style. As such, each of the following offer some valuable but different insights.

Dallas Willard - [Hearing God: Developing a Conversational Relationship with God](#)

Dallas was a Professor of Philosophy at USC whose writing on Christian spirituality have had perhaps the widest and deepest impact in the past century. (He passed onwards from this life in 2013.) His book *The Divine Conspiracy* restored an understanding of what it meant to follow the way of Jesus in spiritual life and practice. He also became a partner in the Vineyard movement and personal influence. This earlier work on "Hearing God" shares the qualities of thinking deeply about what life with God involves. If one can set aside expectations of a simple "three step" manual for hearing God...and welcome a voice that speaks from deep relationship, this will serve your soul.

Mark Virkler - [4 Keys to Hearing God - You Can Hear God's Voice!](#)

Mark Virkler has been teaching at large for decades and helped multitudes in hearing God. I have personally valued his insights and general encouragement but would also note that his "process" may be over-simplified / over-stated, some use of Scripture is "bent" in making a point, and I would not endorse some of the "prophetic" ministries he aligns with. However, he has a valuable journey and process to share. This particular resource is the most succinct and is available for free across downloadable videos. His parallel work "Dialogue with God" is described as the more "right brain" (less informational) version of similar material.

Getting to Know God's Voice: Discover the Holy Spirit in Your Everyday Life (A 31-Day Interactive Journey) by Jenny Randle

I have not read this work but from what I have read of it, it would appear to be among the most practical and helpful works on hearing God, that is developed into a 31 day journey... combining short studies and experiences.

Notes:

1. From Bill Gaultiere [here](#)
2. From Dan Kopp's Blog - [here](#)
3. Thomas Keating, [On Prayer](#)
4. *"Contemplative prayer ...listens not with a view to hearing something, but with a view to becoming aware of the obstacles to one's friendship with God."*
— Thomas Keating, [The Human Condition: Contemplation and Transformation](#)
5. Dallas Willard describes how misguided motivations can be a barrier.
"I fear that many people seek to hear God solely as a device for obtaining their own safety, comfort and righteousness. For those who busy themselves to know the will of God, however, it is still true that "those who want to save their life will lose it" (Mt 16:25). My extreme preoccupation with knowing God's will for me may only indicate, contrary to what is often thought, that I am overconcerned with myself, not a Christlike interest in the well-being of others or in the glory of God... Nothing will go right in our effort to hear God if this false motivation is its foundation. God simply will not cooperate. We must discover a different type of motivation for knowing God's will and listening to his voice." – Dallas Willard – Renovare website "Barrers to Hearing God" - [here](#)