

Conversant Prayer

Does God Speak To Me When I Pray?

by Rebecca S. May

- *Should I listen for God's "still small voice"?*
- *How does God speak to me today?*
- *Am I "led" by the Holy Spirit?*

The statement, "When you pray, do more listening than talking," is a popular phrase describing the expectations of believers who desire God's guidance in their day-to-day decisions. This is typically referred to as "communing with the Lord," by listening or hearing "God's inner voice."

For example, Bill Bright said, "These quiet, undistracted times [during prayer] can open the way for you to hear His voice in a special way" (*The Transforming Power of Fasting and Prayer*, p. 30). A December 2005 *Discipleship Journal* article entitled, "How does the Spirit Speak to Us?" states, "We also find the language of God's personal conversation described in 1 Kings 19:12 as 'a gentle whisper' (NIV), 'a sound of a gentle blowing' (NASB), a 'still small voice' (KJV). It may come as a simple thought, one we 'sense' more than 'think.'" And finally, Bill Hybels, in his book *Honest to God*, said that part of his daily discipline is to "listen and ask God to speak to me." He went on to say, "I begin with these words: 'Lord, You talked to Your children all through history, and You said You're an unchangeable God. Talk to me now. I'm listening. I'm open'" (pp. 24-25).

How Does God Speak?

God did speak to specific individuals prior to the completion of the Bible (Jeremiah 1:9). But He didn't speak often (1 Samuel 3:1), and He didn't speak to everyone (1 Corinthians 12:28-30). Those individuals who received God's revelation announced His moral will and prophetic plan to the people of God (2 Peter 1:19-21). For example, the Israelites cried out to God while enslaved in Egypt, but God chose to reveal Himself only to Moses (Exodus 33:11; 34:10). The Bible never promises or even suggests that Moses' experience is something all believers should expect or go looking for. In fact, when Korah thought that if God spoke through him, he could do a better job of leading the people, God disagreed and swallowed him up in the earth—He wouldn't even speak to Korah in order to tell him he was wrong! (Numbers 16).

What the Moses' example teaches us is that God reveals Himself to whom He wants, when He wants. Moses wasn't praying, pausing, or sitting around "listening" for or waiting on God. And when God did speak, it wasn't subtle—it wasn't a whisper, a feeling, or a nudging by the Holy Spirit. God was conversing with Moses and Moses knew it. If Korah thought it was God's will for him to lead, why didn't he simply pray and listen for God's answer? Because God chose to speak only to Moses.

God's Word is perfect (Psalm 19:7; James 1:25) and complete (Jude 3; 2 Peter 1:3). God revealed Himself through His Word, the Bible. When the Bible commands that we "listen" to God (Psalm 19; Proverbs 28:9), it means understanding and obeying God's revealed Word, the Bible. John said, *He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches*, (Revelation 2:7). "What the Spirit says," is what God inspired the prophets and apostles to record as Scripture (Galatians 1:11-12). These men had the gift of prophecy (Deuteronomy 18:18-19) which was attested to by various other signs and miracles (1 Samuel 3:20; Hebrews 2:4). According to NASB translator, Dr. Robert Thomas, "With the completion of the last book of the New Testament, the gift of prophecy became obsolete. Since the Book of Revelation covers events occurring from the time John wrote it until the eternal state, any alleged prophecy subsequent to the Book of Revelation is counterfeit" (*Prophecy Rediscovered*, p. 95).

What Is Biblical Prayer?

In the Bible, prayer is one-way. It is communicating a message to God when He is not specifically manifested. When people in the Bible spoke directly to Jesus, who was physically present, it was conversation—the Bible never calls that prayer.

The fact that God answers prayer in no way implies that God speaks through or during prayer—He never promised to do that. When I expect God to answer my prayer by speaking to me, I am ignoring who the Bible says God is and focusing on who I want Him to be. We should heed Walt Henrichsen's advice and "never commit God to what He has not promised" (*Thoughts From the Diary of a Desperate Man*, p. 326).

The most definitive passage on prayer in the Bible is Matthew chapter 6. When the disciples asked Jesus how to pray, Jesus responded with the example known as "The Lord's Prayer." Nowhere in the context of Christ's teaching on prayer does He state or even imply that "listening" is or should be part of prayer. Furthermore, Paul tells the Corinthians what should and should not be worn during prayer (1 Corinthians 11), and yet he fails to mention anything about "listening" to God. In addition to Jesus and Paul, James (5:16-18), the author of Hebrews (13:18-19), Peter (1 Peter 3:7), John (1 John 5:14-17), and Jude (20) all have lessons for us on prayer, and all of them say nothing about "listening" to God before, during, or after prayer.

If this is something God did, is doing, or desiring to do, wouldn't He have mentioned it in the context of prayer somewhere in the Bible? David was a man of prayer, and yet when David prayed, God was silent (Psalm 4:1; 22:2). Solomon dedicated the Temple in one of Scripture's most eloquent of prayers, and God was silent (1 Kings 8). Jesus Himself prayed in His most desperate hour, and God was silent (Matthew 26:39-44). The fact is, the phrase "listening to God" or "hearing God" exists in the context of understanding and responding to God's Word as He has already revealed it in the Scriptures or as He was revealing it to His prophets and apostles.

How Does the Holy Spirit Work?

Bill Hybels says, "God's leadings don't have to make sense. But I'm learning to walk by faith, and not by sight" (*Honest to God*, p. 26). God's leadings don't make sense to Hybels because he is not using the Scripture to determine God's will. Misunderstanding God happens when you make personal experience your authority instead of the Bible. God's leadings always make sense because God directs us by clarifying His perfect written Word (1 Corinthians 2:14-16; Ephesians 3:16-19; Colossians 1:9), making it understandable and therefore applicable (Galatians 5:16-25). It is Satan who is the father of lies, misleading by his craftiness, and the author of confusion, tempting you to receive a different spirit (2 Corinthians 11:3-4; John 8:44). "Walking by faith" means learning to trust God by applying His written Word—the Bible.

The Holy Spirit may lead you by controlling events for the purpose of accomplishing God's individual or eternal plan. This is something God does, not something we can predetermine or are even made aware of by God. It is only something we may recognize in retrospect (Acts 16:7). John MacArthur explained this very well. He said, "Do I believe God leads? Yes. Do I believe the Spirit of God prompts us to do certain things? Yes. Do I know when that is happening? No. No, because I don't have any way to know that. There is no way to distinguish a personal impulse, a personal desire from a prompting of the Holy Spirit. There is nothing in Scripture that identifies any way in which you can know that." MacArthur goes on to say, "I think it is a very dangerous thing to tell people to sit around and listen for the voice of God. How do you know what it is since God no longer speaks audibly? God has never said a word to me in my entire life that isn't between Genesis and Revelation. That is all God ever said to me, and He was silent after that" (*The End Times*, May/June 2003, pp. 13-14).

Greek scholar Daniel Wallace explains this further. In his paper, *Scripture Twisting: Abusing Scripture, Abusing God*, he said, "... the work of the Spirit today is decidedly not on the cognitive level: He is not bringing us new revelation. His work in relation to the Bible is primarily in the realm of conviction: He helps to drive home the message of the Bible, once it is properly understood" (*bible.org*).

When Paul said, *For all who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God* (Romans 8:14), he was not referring to God speaking. "Being led by the Spirit" is virtually synonymous with walking according to the Spirit. 'Walking' highlights the active participation and effort of the believer. 'Being led' underscores the passive side, the submissive dependence of the believer on the Spirit" (*NET Bible*, p. 1892).

Paul reiterates this in Galatians. *But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh. For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another, so that you may not do the things that you please. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the Law* (5:16-18). John MacArthur says, “God’s Spirit objectively leads His children sometimes through the orchestration of circumstances.” However, “Believers are not led through subjective, mental impressions or promptings to provide direction in making life’s decisions—something Scripture nowhere teaches” (*The MacArthur Bible Commentary*, p. 1531).

Conclusion

Those who endorse “listening to God” do not believe in the sufficiency of the Bible. Hybels, for example, says, “One time I sensed God telling me to loosen up. I was too concerned about trying to please Him ...” (*Honest to God*, p. 25). Does the Bible say that there is ever a time when trying to please God is something we could be too concerned with? If the Bible is your only authority, pleasing God is something we could never be too concerned with. But if Hybels believes that God Himself actually spoke to him, he will inevitably be faced with the question, Do I follow the Spirit’s leading or do I follow the Bible’s teaching?

When the first century believers were battling false teaching, Jude did not tell them to “listen” to the Holy Spirit to see how God would lead them to deal with it. Rather, he told them to remember the words that were spoken beforehand by the apostles (verse 17). He doesn’t suggest they go looking for a new word from God, rather they should remember what the apostles already taught them.

Bottom line: you cannot know whether anything is for sure from God unless you examine the Scriptures (Acts 17:11).

Questions and Answers

Q: *Should I listen for God’s “still small voice”?*

A: No, There is no example or command in the Bible to do this. God chose to speak to Elijah with a “still small voice.” But God didn’t speak often, and when He did speak it, not only was it audible (a “still small voice” is still a voice), it was also unique to each prophet or apostle.

Q: *How does God speak to me today?*

A: God speaks today through His written Word, the Bible. When the Bible commands “listening to God,” it is referring to a proper understanding and application of the Scriptures which are “the only infallible rule for faith and life” (John Walvoord, *Contemporary Issues in the Doctrine of the Holy Spirit*, p. 15).

Q: *Am I “led” by the Holy Spirit?*

A: To be led by the Holy Spirit is virtually synonymous with walking by the Spirit. To walk by the Spirit is to not carry out the desires of the flesh (Galatians 5:16-18). You are led by the Spirit when you do not do the things that you please but pursue those things which are pleasing to God (Matthew 5:6; 1 Corinthians 9:27).