

## Special Section: Surrender

### The Listening Side Of Prayer How to hear God's voice above the clamor

By Stacey Padrick



Illustration by Karen Newe

God desires for us to be intimate with Him. If we are going to go deeper in our walk with Him, then we need to develop that intimacy. And true intimacy with God requires more than just speaking to Him—it involves listening to Him as well.

I used to think, If only God would speak more clearly, I would follow Him more closely. I have often complained that His still, small voice seemed too still and too small. But at unexpected times, when I became quiet for a few moments—stopping from my jog to watch a sunset, or gazing at a starry evening sky while taking out my trash—I have heard Him, the voice of a friend, a friend longing to be heard and waiting for my ears to be open and attentive.

God desires to communicate with His people, even more than we desire to communicate with Him! He is still the same God and continues to speak to us, if only we have ears to hear. I have learned to hear His voice through listening prayer—what some call contemplative prayer.

Contemplative prayer isn't simply prayer for those who are more reflective in personality. It is for introverts and extroverts alike. You may think of contemplative prayer as a practice only of saints and mystics in by-gone eras. But it is not limited to a particular type of person, a particular era, nor is it reserved for the “super spiritual”—those who seem to have an intimacy with God we have not experienced.

Contemplative prayer is a form of prayer that all believers today can enjoy.



Illustration by Karen Newe

## What is contemplative prayer?

So what exactly is contemplative prayer? How can we in our world of incessant noise and activity incorporate it into our daily lives? Contemplative prayer is thoughtful, reflective prayer. It requires effort. Rather than a passive form of prayer, it demands active listening, focused attention, and confident expectation that God will speak.

In contemplative prayer, we are still before God, reflecting, anticipating, listening, and waiting on Him. Throughout the Psalms, David models one who waits on God in this way: “My soul waits in silence for God only” (Psalm 62:1, NASB). “My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet with God?” (Psalm 42:2).

Contemplative prayer is being with God, empty-handed, waiting attentively for whatever He wants to speak, to show, or to do. It is the discipline of being still, knowing that He is God (Psalm 46:10).

If contemplative prayer is not an elaborate form of prayer reserved for monks, why don't we practice it? We discipline ourselves to meet regularly with God for supplication, intercession, and Bible study. Why is simply sitting at His feet with no agenda so difficult—even frightening?

Most of us argue that we haven't “enough time.” Those of us who have taken time may complain that God doesn't seem to speak clearly. But upon closer inspection of these excuses in my life, I recognize other reasons for my avoidance. I am afraid of what I might hear. When I quietly wait on God, the Holy Spirit often speaks penetrating words—words of conviction, words of love, or no words at all.

With words of conviction, God reveals actions or attitudes I need to confess to Him and sometimes others and directs me to seek reconciliation.

On many occasions, as I take time to listen to God, the Holy Spirit reminds me of a recent conversation and a comment I made that was neither edifying nor necessary. Had I not taken time to allow His Spirit to bring this to light, I would not have recognized the hurt I caused Him and another person. Only by listening to the Spirit's conviction can I recognize my sin and hear Him direct me to seek forgiveness from my friend.

At other times as I listen, God has exposed attitudes of mine that dishonor Him. For instance, when I have been wrought with anxiety about a situation I face, He has revealed that my anxiety reflects a lack of trust in Him—in both His concern for me and His ability to work in and through my crisis.

Surprisingly, I often find myself just as reluctant to hear His words of love—particularly when offered apart from anything I have done or plan to do for Him. When I anxiously strive to please God by my works yet fall short of my expectations, I feel less than lovable. Hearing then His words of grace and love can be painfully difficult. Like an uncomely peasant girl who withdraws in shame at the beckoning words of love from a handsome prince, we too are sometimes afraid to hear the powerful whispers of love from our great Prince. His amazing love

our concerns, seek His guidance, and request His blessing. Yet, how it must grieve our Father's heart that we come to Him only in want of something, rather than coming simply because we enjoy being in the Father's presence.

Perhaps another reason we hesitate to practice contemplative, listening prayer is we fear hearing no words at all. Influenced by our product-oriented culture, we strive to attain some tangible result validating the use of our time, even our devotional time with God. So afraid of "wasting time," we become unable to enjoy the delight of simply being with Him. Yet, as two lovers are content to be in each other's presence, not needing always to speak, God delights for us to sit at His feet and enjoy being with Him.

## Putting It into Practice

How can we begin to practice contemplative prayer? The following are suggestions to explore. They are not meant to be formulas. Ask God to show you additional ways to incorporate contemplative prayer into your life.

### **1. Meditate on Scripture.** "I will meditate on your precepts" (Psalm 119:78).

After studying Scripture, choose one verse, phrase, or word upon which to meditate. Ponder it. Slowly repeat it. Ask the Lord what He wants to speak to you through it. Perhaps check the dictionary to attain the full definition of a word.

For example, choose a verse such as, "The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not be in want" (Psalm 23:1). Sometimes, such a familiar verse loses its meaning. Meditating upon it and asking questions reveals what we may be overlooking: What is a shepherd's role and responsibility toward his sheep? Are sheep able to help themselves? Do I have want? Have I asked God to provide for me in that area? What is He saying to me about my needs?

Take time to savor each word, that you may taste the richness of His spiritual food and its nourishment for your life.

### **2. Sing and pray the Psalms.** "Sing praise to the Lord" (Psalm 68:32).

After reading a psalm, begin to sing it to a tune you know or create as you go along. I find that singing a psalm helps me ponder it afresh by increasing my involvement in what I am reading. Try praying the psalm as if you had written the words from your heart.

Or learn from those who for centuries have chanted the Psalms. During my stay at a monastery, I joined the monks as they chanted a few chapters of the Psalms each morning and evening.

**3. Journal in prayer.** Write your prayers to God and wait for His response. Writing helps us stay focused and enables us to probe our thoughts and heart more deeply. Try an exercise called "Dialogue with God." Write something you want to tell God (for instance, a statement—rather than a question—about something happening in your life). Then listen for His still, small voice. Asking the Holy Spirit to guide you, write what you sense is His response to your statement. Continue the dialogue until you believe God has finished speaking to you.

For example, while struggling with a chronic illness, I wrote in my journal:

*Stacey: O Lord, I know You can heal me.*

*God: Yes, I can heal you, but I want to heal your spirit first. Will you let Me heal your spirit and wait on My timing to heal your body?*

When I first learned this exercise, I was very reluctant. How presumptuous to think I could write God's response to me! Yet, I beheld with amazement His words to me through this exercise—words very different from what I expected to hear. He has often brought Scripture to mind or emphasized that which I already know but am having difficulty believing. Through this

exercise, God also points out the enemy's lies I have been listening to and directs me to claim His words of truth. I recommend writing with a Bible nearby to refer to as He leads.

**4. Take a walk in nature and listen to God speak to you through His creation.** "The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge" (Psalm 19:1–2).

When I take time to thoughtfully observe God's creation, He tangibly teaches me His Word. While I sit alone on a beach, absorbed in the power and constancy of the waves, He reminds me that His love for me is constant: "The LORD'S lovingkindnesses indeed never cease, for His compassions never fail. They are new every morning" (Lament. 3:22–23, NASB). Running my fingers through the sand around me, I remember David's words, "How precious to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them! Were I to count them, they would outnumber the grains of sand" (Psalm 139:17–18). Looking out toward the vast ocean, I ponder, "If I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me" (Psalm 139:9–10).

**5. Be still before Him.** "The LORD is good to those who wait for Him, to the person who seeks Him. It is good that he waits silently. . . . Let him sit alone and be silent" (Lament. 3:25–26; Lament. 3:28, NASB). In this posture of stillness, we can more keenly hear Him speak. We honor God by expressing our willingness to be still in His presence.

We may find it difficult and uncomfortable at first to relinquish our needs-oriented approach to prayer. But I firmly believe we delight God's heart when we come to Him not to receive or give Him anything, but rather simply to delight ourselves in Him (Psalm 37:4). Do not ask for anything. Instead, allow Him to express His love and joy over you.

If total stillness is difficult, try the following exercises. After closing your eyes and stilling your body, become aware of your breathing. As you slowly inhale, think on a name of Jesus:

- Meditate on this name as you slowly speak it to yourself, reflecting upon all that it means; for example: Bread of Life, Good Shepherd, Master, Light of the World, the Vine, the Door, the Resurrection and the Life, Alpha and Omega . . .

- Or meditate on the names of God: Deliverer, Rock, Strong Tower, Jehovah-Jireh (Provider), Jehovah-Rapha (the Lord who Heals), I AM, Abba . . .

- A similar exercise helps when I am anxious. I slowly inhale, saying to myself Jesus' name, and with each exhalation I release a fear or worry that is on my mind. Then, I continue to think on Jesus' name, yet each time I exhale I think on a characteristic of Jesus; for example: my hope, my joy, my peace, or my righteousness. There is power in Jesus' name.

Try scheduling a longer period of time once a week for contemplation. Reflect on the events of the week, conversations, unexpected news, a sermon, or something you are reading. I like to see it as "making a date with God." In our fast-paced world, many of us realize we have to make dates even with spouses or others close to us so we can have quality, one-on-one time together. Why not make a date with God, apart from your devotional, as time to "hang out" with Him? Go for a walk alone with Him, or sit with a cup of coffee and talk to Him freely, listen, and enjoy being with Him.

Developing a discipline takes perseverance. Our flesh does not like to be trained and controlled. We will find every reason not to practice contemplative prayer: Things must be done, phone calls must be made, worries crowd our thoughts. As we sit in silence, we will itch and squirm, our backs will ache, and our stomachs will grumble. But as we sit with Him in faith and obedience, He will honor our desire to know and hear Him. Do not be discouraged if you do not hear anything. God often wants us to sit in stillness at His feet and learn to be content in His presence. Pray for the desire and grace to communicate with God in this intimate way.



**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:**

STACEY PADRICK is currently working at a retreat center for Christian leaders.

Her favorite verse is “I came that they might have life, and might have it abundantly” (John 10:10, *NASB*). Stacey wishes that more believers today would understand their identity in Christ—what it means to be “in Christ” before God, and what it means to be His children.