

How do we hear God in prayer?

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Preacher: Rev Dave Brown

[0 : 0 0] Let's pray as we stand. I heard the voice of Jesus say, come unto me and rest.! Father, as we come to your word now, would you please speak to us afresh?

Would you write it on our hearts? Would you bring us comfort and challenge, joy and hope, wisdom and direction for our lives? That all we do may glorify your holy name.

Amen. Amen. Amen. But do please be seated. Over the last four weeks, we've thought a little about speaking to God in prayer.

And we'll think more about that next week too. But prayer is much more than just a one-way conversation. Prayer is not just about us bringing our praise and worship to God, our confession, our intercessions to him.

Prayer, true Christian prayer. Prayer is also a means by which God speaks to us. That's what the writer of Psalm 130 is hoping for, isn't he?

[1 : 0 8] He doesn't just want to be heard as if the prayers have reached heaven and that's it. He wants a response. So verse 2. Hear my voice, Lord. Hear my voice, Lord.

Let your ears be attentive to my cry for mercy. He's crying out for mercy. He is desperate for a merciful response. Kind of whether you've ever had difficulties with something that you bought. When we moved to the vicarage here, we bought a new cooker. We searched hard and found the right one, which had a timer on it. So Judy could set the roast potatoes to come on so they were done by the time we got home.

It's really important. But when the cooker was installed and it was done before we arrived, we came to plan the first Sunday lunch.

And, ooh, well, there's a clock. But there's no timer feature. So we were writing lots of letters, as it turned out, lots of phone calls. And what we wanted from the company wasn't just a, oh, thank you.

[2 : 1 0] We have received your letter. No, we wanted them to do something. Ideally to fix this machine. But that proved impossible, it seems.

They no longer make it with a timer on, even though that's what they were advertising. But when we bring our prayers to God, as the psalmist does here, he doesn't want God just to say, OK, thank you, I've heard that.

No, no, he wants a response, doesn't he? He wants to know that his sins have been forgiven. He wants to know that he's been cleansed from his sin. So that, verse 4, he can serve God with joy and reverence.

He wants a response from God. Now, how might that happen? How might God have answered the psalmist? Well, I did some thinking. You know, I reckon I've come up with 12 different ways that God speaks to people in the Bible.

You might be able to think of some more, but here they are. In visions and dreams, there's our first two. By angels and by donkeys. There's only one talking donkey, by the way.

[3 : 1 4] By stars and creation. By circumstances happening, which guides people. By other people bringing a word or a message. That's, what are we up to there?

Two, four, six, there we're up to eight. God also speaks to people by what's called theophanies. That's a dramatic personal appearance of God the Son before he comes in his incarnation.

So has God come to Abraham and to Jacob, for example. That's a theophany. God appears and speaks to them. And of course God speaks through an audible voice on occasions.

I suspect that when I talked about God speaking, that's what you imagined. Ah, I've got to hear something. There's got to be a voice ringing out in the quiet of my study or wherever you are praying.

It could be a small whisper or an earth-shattering utterance. The Bible has instances where God's voice is heard exactly like that. As a still, small voice as Elijah is in the desert.

[4 : 16] For Israel in front of Mount Sinai, God's speaking with such a powerful voice that the people are petrified. Now God can and still does use these means to speak to people.

But I have to say they are rare and extraordinary. That's why they're written down in the scriptures as something notable. One of the other means of God speaking was also extraordinary.

The writer of Hebrews explains it this way. In the past, God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways.

But in these last days, he has spoken to us by his son, whom he appointed heir of all things and through whom he also made the universe.

God's most perfect communication with human beings was in the person of Jesus. That's one of the reasons why Jesus is called the Word of God. Because he communicated God to people.

[5 : 15] He spoke with the authority and voice of God. So Jesus was, on a number of occasions, able to assure people, which is what the psalmist wanted, that their sins were forgiven.

That they could now serve him freely and with joy. But if you and I are waiting for Jesus to come in person or for an audible voice to come from heaven, then we may be waiting a long time.

Jesus will come again. But not in the same way that he came 2,000 years ago. He will not come back as a travelling teacher or as a personal comforter. He will come back as a conquering king and a presiding judge.

But as we read Psalm 130, it's clear that the psalmist didn't need a vision, an audible voice, a star, an angelic message, or even a talking donkey to find assurance of his forgiveness.

Not to forget God's unfailing love and promises that he mentions in verse 7. So how is it that God spoke to him? How is it that his needs were met, that he found comfort and assurance and confidence in God's mercy, forgiveness and love?

[6 : 26] But if you look down with me at verse 5, at the end of that verse, you'll see the answer. What does the psalmist say? In his words I put my hope. In his words I put my hope.

I've mentioned 11 ways that God spoke to people in the Bible. Here is the 12th that I came up with. And it's the one most easily and readily available to all of us. The scriptures themselves.

You see, it was as the psalmist read and meditated on the scriptures. And at this point, of course, they don't have very much. But as he meditated on God's written word, that God spoke to him and assured him of his forgiveness.

So I wonder what he might have read. Well, perhaps he might have been reading through Leviticus and got to chapter 4 and read about the effectiveness of the sin sacrifices to deal with people's sinfulness.

How that offering for one who is truly penitent deals with their sin. Or maybe he was reading Exodus 34, where God reveals himself to be a gracious and forgiving God.

[7 : 33] And as the psalmist read these passages, he would have seen how God treated those who come to him in true repentance. And since God's character doesn't change, well, the psalmist would have been able to have a conversation with himself, wouldn't he?

How does God treat people who truly come with repentant hearts? Well, he forgives them. God's character doesn't change. I'm coming with a truly repentant heart. God, how will you treat me?

In the same way. My sin will be forgiven. At that point, the truths about God leave the pages of the Bible and become words that penetrated his soul and brought him comfort and joy and hope.

That's where the writer of Hebrews comes in again, that second passage that Ruth read to us. How did he describe the scriptures? In chapter 4, verse 12, like this.

For the word of God is alive and active, sharper than any double-edged sword. It penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joint and marrow. It judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.

[8 : 39] Alive and active. Rather interesting words to describe the book, aren't they? This book is alive and active. But of course, the Bible is not just a book.

It's not even just a library of 66 books. It is the word of God in written form. In these pages, we find all we need for salvation. All we need to live a faithful Christian life.

All we need to stand firm in our faith and grow in our faith. No matter what seasons the Lord brings to us. Now, God may speak to us in a dream or a vision.

Occasionally in the Bible, we speak of angels becoming visible. But there is no need to wait for something spectacular. Or to wait to hear a voice booming out of the silence down from heaven.

If we want God to speak to us, friends, then all we need to do is open up the scriptures. And ask God to speak to us as we bring our prayers to him.

[9 : 38] That he might bring it alive. That the book would speak to us with his very words and apply it to our hearts. I'll suggest some ways that we can do that in a moment.

But maybe you're thinking, well, that's all very well. But Dave, isn't that just a dusty old book? How can we know that the words that we're going to find in there are going to be trustworthy? Well, let me give you four very quick reasons.

Firstly, it's what the Bible says about itself. The Apostle Peter writes this. For prophecy, meaning all of scripture, never had its origin in the human world, but prophets.

Though humans spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit. The Bible itself says these are not just the imaginings of various people across the ages.

These are the words of God. Paul says something similar in Timothy 2. All scripture is God-breathed. Secondly, Jesus spoke of the Old Testament.

[10 : 35] Because he didn't have the new. He was in it, wasn't he? It wasn't written there. But he spoke about the Old Testament as God's word. Time and time again, he's arguing with religious leaders. Or talking to his disciples.

And he's opening up the scriptures to them and saying, it's all about me, you know. Let me tell you what God is like from here. If you want to understand God's word, God's will, well, you need to look in here.

Thirdly, if you're thinking about the trustworthiness of the Bible, well, archaeology backs up what the Bible says. Particularly when it comes to the gospel. This is a great book. It's Jesus History by John Dixon.

Actually, John's aunt sings in the choir at Gravelly. You can go and talk to her about that. But John's written a wonderful book. He's a historian. He's looked at what history says.

And compared it to what the Bible says about the life of Jesus. And gone, wow, isn't that amazing? Everything the Bible says is backed up by archaeology and secular history.

[11 : 35] And of course, that's what the church has taught from across the ages. As Anglicans, we look to the 39 articles of religion as one of the foundation documents of our faith.

This is Article 20. It says this. The church has power to decree rights or ceremonies and authority in controversies of faith. And yet it is not lawful for the church to ordain anything that is contrary to God's written words.

Neither may it so expound one place of scripture that it be repugnant. That means contrary to another. So the church stands on the Bible.

Can the Bible be trusted? Can we read it as God's living and active word? Well, yes, we can. The Bible says so. The apostles say so. Jesus says so. And the church says so. It's four great witnesses for you.

And if you've got any questions, well, archaeology will back up much of what we need. But we've got to be careful as we're written, as we open up God's word and ask him to speak to us.

[12 : 42] Because just as God himself is untameable, holy and almighty. So what has the writer of Hebrews said? Well, God's word is active and alive, sharper than a double-edged sword.

Spurgeon, the great Baptist preacher, was asked if he should defend the Bible that he so faithfully preached from. He put it this way. Defend the Bible?

I'd sooner defend a lion. You don't defend the Bible. You open its cage and let it roar. That passage from Hebrews reminds us of what we're likely to face when we open up the scriptures.

And let God speak to us through his words. We can expect to have the thoughts and attitudes of our hearts laid bare. Our weaknesses exposed. Our sins uncovered. Our temptations, doubts and fears revealed by God's word.

Does that sound like something we might do casually? Well, I don't think so. But then the Christian life isn't meant to be casual, is it? Prayer is not meant to be casual.

[13 : 45] Think what we're doing when we come to pray. We are talking with almighty God. God, the Alpha and the Omega, the creator and sustainer of the universe. A God so holy that even Moses, the greatest prophet in the Old Testament, was forced to be hidden in a cleft of a rock.

In case he saw the full face of the glory of God. Prayer is us coming humbly before the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords in humility and trust.

Bringing our prayers and praise to God. Yes, God is our loving Father. Of course he is. That means we can come boldly and confidently into his presence. But we should never come flippantly as if prayer is the same as having a few texts with your mate.

It isn't. How much more so when God speaks back. When God speaks to us, we need to listen. When he commands, we need to act.

When his word convicts, we must repent. And of course, as we open up God's word and find in it comfort and encouragement and assurance of love and pardon. Then we need to let those words sink in and change us and encourage us.

[15 : 01] And bring us the peace that they promise. As well as being moved to thankfulness and praise and obedience. Brothers and sisters, true prayer then is a life-altering thing.

A character-changing thing. As we encounter God through his word as he speaks to us. A word that testifies to his son in the power and the presence of the spirit.

More and more we are conformed more into the image and likeness of Jesus. So hearing God speak is a wonderful thing, but it's not for the faint-hearted. The Bible is a sword, a fire, a roaring lion.

Alive and powerful. But like Aslan in C.S. Lewis's Narnia Chronicles, God's word, like God himself, is gentle and kind. It's full of grace and mercy.

He's eager to provide strength for the weary and comfort for the broken. Good news for the soul of the sinner who has come to God in search of living, cleansing water and eternal bread.

[16 : 08] That's the warning. It should encourage us to come as well. So how do we hear God's voice as we read the scriptures?

But on your notice sheet, on the inside page, next to where we'll find our next hymn, you'll see some suggestions there about how we might meditate on God's word.

The first is just three questions to ask and to think through as you read the Bible. It's a way of getting past the problem of the Big Bang.

You know that problem? The Big Bang? The problem with the Big Bang? Well, you've done what you need to do in the morning. You've opened up the word. You've maybe read the scriptures with some Bible notes.

You think, oh, I've done that. And then the Big Bang comes. The Bible is slammed shut. But if the Bible is closed, then how can God speak to us still?

[17 : 08] Because if your memory is anything like mine, the words that you've read, even two or three minutes ago, well, they'll be long gone because you've now got a list of things to pray to God for rather than have a conversation about his words and letting him bring his word to life.

See, our time with God shouldn't be like those conversations that I'm sure you've had with one or two people you know. You know the kind of person. You meet them for a coffee and you say, so how are you? And they spend the next half an hour telling you all about themselves.

Then they look at the watch and they say, I'm sorry, it's time to go. Hope you're okay. That was lovely. That's great to talk. Well, you haven't actually done any talking, have you? You've just been listening for half an hour. Our conversations with God shouldn't be like that.

God has spoken to us through the prophets and apostles. He's caused his word to be written down. And as we sit and read and meditate on it, God will bring it alive and speak to us.

If we're to do that, it means silence so that our mouths aren't working all the time. It means listening to the words God has already given so they might be applied to our hearts.

[18 : 23] So having read some scripture, we can take the time to ask God how these fit with us today. Those first three questions might be useful.

Am I living in the light of this? Let that question resonate in our minds as we're reading over what we've raised. If I believed and held to this, how would that change things?

That leads to prayer, that kind of question, doesn't it? So, Father, what would that be? What about this situation? It's an ongoing conversation where we let God's word have an impact on us.

When I forget this, that third question, how does that change my relationships? That gives you something to pray about, to talk to God about, to let his word that he has given to us sink in before we get to the long list of things that we would like God to do for us.

Underneath that is a pattern of prayer taken from Martin Luther's A Simple Way to Pray. He wrote a little pamphlet for one of his friends, and that was his response.

[19 : 34] Points one and two are just ways to begin, but then there are four questions under that third point. Again, just to help us meditate on God's word, to have a thought conversation with God.

Let his word speak to us. At the prayer course this week, we'll be thinking more about how we meditate on God's word and let him speak to us.

Even if you haven't been to any of the sessions yet, why not come along to this one? They all stand on their own. Tomorrow, lunchtime, half past 12 at Abbotsbury, or seven o'clock here on Tuesday evening.

There'll be some help, some time on our own. You won't be doing this out loud, just to sit with the scriptures open and to practice letting God speak to us.

Two final thoughts as I close. Firstly, please don't mishear me and think that I'm saying, well, the only way God can ever speak to us today is through the scriptures.

[20 : 35] I hope you go away from church sometimes and sense that the words you've heard from the lectern have been helpful to you, that God was speaking to you through the preaching.

I hope that the words that you sing together as we raise our voices in praise resonate in your hearts and remind you of truths about God. If you read a good Christian book, there will be things there that speak to you.

The still, small voice of your conscience might tell you the rightness or wrongness of something. A friend might give you some great advice, which changes the direction of your life. You might sense a calling somewhere inside to serve God in a new way.

Maybe in a new place. Maybe you're watching race around the world and you think, I wonder if God's calling me there. God can speak in other ways.

He always has. Perhaps he might speak to you in a vision or a dream. Maybe you'll hear an audible voice. Maybe you'll meet an angel. Maybe even a donkey will talk to you.

[21 : 41] Who knows? God is sovereign. He can speak to people in any way he likes. But here's the word of warning. Our imaginations can do all kinds of things with us. How do we know that what we have heard in those other ways truly align with what God has said?

With his will and purposes for us? Well, for that we need to go to the scriptures. And we need to check everything there. We need to compare any new revelation, any word that God has already, that God gives, with what he has already said.

See, God will never contradict himself. There is something in here that the Lord says is wrong, that he won't change his mind and say, well, it's okay for you now. And in the same way, if God has said some things in here that are good and helpful, then even if your conscience or someone else is saying, well, you shouldn't be doing that.

But if the Bible says it's okay, then it's okay. God doesn't change his mind. We need to check other ways that God speaks to us with what the Bible is telling us.

But lastly, let me stress again the privilege that it is to hear the voice of God. Because it is, isn't it? How amazing is it that you and I, wherever we are, whatever we're doing, particularly as we've got God's word open in front of us, that almighty God will speak to us.

[23 : 04] Because he has spoken definitively, clearly, sufficiently, finally. And as we read the word, as we meditate on those words, maybe when we're out walking or in the shower or wherever we might be later in the day, God will speak to us afresh.

And in his grace, God has preserved those words that they would do that. Across the centuries, he's given people the ability to translate them from ancient Greek and Hebrew into our modern English.

Today, a Bible will cost you five pounds, some copies. You can even have them in your phone. Or have someone read the scriptures to you. What a privilege it is to have that.

But that should mean that we have no excuse not to listen. There is never a reason to worry that God has gone silent. Because as we open up the scriptures, we find words of comfort and peace, of encouragement, of strength, of godly wisdom and wonderful insight.

Through the words of this book, God offers to guide us and call us, rebuke us and correct us, challenge us, command us to obedience, and then show us where we can find the strength to live for him.

[24 : 19] And it's in here that we find God's words of assurance and hope. The truth about God and the truth about ourselves. The wonderful news of Jesus.

And the promise of forgiveness and eternal life. God has spoken to us. As we pray, let's make sure we are listening to him.

That we might truly live. May God bless us. And help us to do that. Amen. Amen.