

Sunday 20th July 2025 - Living Prayer: Listening To God

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Preacher: Laura Edwards

[0 : 00] So, this morning we are going to continue in the series of living prayer.! And we're going to spend some time thinking about listening to God.! And as with any relationship, it isn't one-sided.

We should be expectant for communication and direction back from God. Prayer shouldn't be one way. Although I'm sure we've all had times where we list things off in prayer like a shopping list or frantically talk at God.

So, I grew up going to a church that never talked about listening to God. I may have heard people say, oh, that was a God thing. But the concept of God actively speaking and guiding us was really introduced to me as an adult.

So, I'm really interested in all of this. But I'm no expert. And in fact, while I've been putting this talk together this week, I've been thinking about how busy I've been in the last six months.

Both physically and mentally. And I don't think God's been able to catch me, let alone communicate with me. But, we can approach this with confidence.

[1 : 16] Because God can and wants to communicate with us. So, on that foundation this morning, we're going to explore this together. So, a headline that stood out to me this week was, Celebrities are hearing from God.

And it's changing popular culture as we know it. So, here are some of the celebrities that have spoken out about hearing from God.

Hopefully, you'll know one or two of these at least. So, we have Justin Bieber, Denzel Washington, Chris Pratt, Meryl Streep, Kevin Hart.

And going back in history, we have Florence Nightingale and Abraham Lincoln, both telling of times that God has spoken to them. And I think it really takes courage to tell people about this.

It's always a bit risky to claim we've heard from God. So, how can we be sure? Well, from the opening chapter in the Bible, God is described as someone who speaks.

[2 : 31] In Genesis, God said, Let there be light. And with those four words, or two in Hebrew, God created a hundred billion galaxies.

And this is described in Psalm 33. We read, The Lord merely spoke, and the heavens were created. He breathed the word, and all the stars were born.

And in the opening of John's Gospel, we are introduced to Jesus as the word of God. In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God, and the word was God.

Our God is a great communicator. So, how does God speak to us? Well, wouldn't it be great if we could just get a text or an email from God that was really specific?

On rare occasions in the Bible, God is described as speaking clearly in an auditory way, such as at Jesus' baptism and transfiguration. But more often, he seems to communicate by giving people an inner conviction of truth, or by making his will clear through circumstances.

[3 : 51] We may also expect a booming loud voice or dramatic thunder. Yet we also see in Scripture, when God spoke to Elijah, it's described as a still, small voice.

So how might we hear from God in our prayer life? So here are a few examples. It's not an exhaustive list, but these are perhaps some of the more common ways.

God speaks to us through vision. So God speaks to some people in pictures, through imagery. This is usually through our imaginations, and imagery is in fact one of the most common and powerful forms of communication in the Scriptures.

We have lots of examples of God appearing to people in dreams and visions in the Bible. So either sleeping or awake. A vicar at my previous church that I went to would regularly receive images during prayer and worship.

And I wasn't used to this, and I remember the first time he said, Oh, I've just had a really clear picture of a suitcase, and I sense that someone is about to start a new beginning. And he went on to say, you know, if you think this is you, please come at the end and I'll pray with you.

[5 : 12] And at the end, somebody did say, I think it was me. And they prayed. And after being there a while and hearing God speak through this person, it really strengthened my faith.

So while this is something I've never personally experienced, some of you may have. And I would encourage you to share it, as it can really encourage those around you. We also know that creation is God's canvas.

God can speak to us through the visual nature of our surroundings, with all the wonder, beauty, fragility that we see. As part of creation, God came to us in Jesus.

Because Jesus was with us in the flesh, part of our understanding of how God speaks to us can be to use our imagination to think about how Jesus conducted himself in person.

Have you ever thought of how Jesus sat with people? How tactile he was? Did he make eye contact? Crouch down to people?

[6 : 20] Where did he sit at the table? The washing of people's feet. All visual communication in the way Jesus conducted himself. I often wonder what Jesus' body language was like.

How did he walk? Stand? Sit? To show people he was present with them. So it wasn't just his words. How do we imagine Jesus might conduct himself if he was spending time in our company right now?

How might Jesus communicate with us in ways that aren't just words? As we perhaps spend time imagining and thinking and praying through these things with God, I wonder how we might be able to increasingly emulate the ways of Jesus with our body language, our openness, compassion, approachability, so that we can show the love of Jesus in ways beyond just words.

So that's one way God speaks to us through the visual. Another way is God can speak to us through scripture. You might hear or be drawn to a specific passage in the Bible.

You might be taking part in a home group or listening to the Bible read in church. And God can draw us towards a particular phrase or part of the story and can communicate with us through that.

[7 : 51] And one of the things I love about scripture is it doesn't matter how many times we've heard a well-known passage, God can and will always reveal something new to us. So on two separate occasions, I've been given a Bible verse when I've been coming round from sleep.

For example, the most recent has been this verse from Ephesians 2.10. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

And this is when I was changing jobs and I was really unsure about it. And I really felt God was speaking to me through that verse. Perhaps you've had a similar experience or it might be a line or a verse in a song or hymn that really resonates with you.

You might not even like the song, but something might be really sticking out for you. So what else? Well, God can speak through our emotions.

We may sense through the Holy Spirit what God is saying to us and feel that through our emotions or feel it physically. We might feel hopeful, sad or unusually bothered by something.

[9 : 07] We might just have that gut feeling where we know how we should react or what we would consider to be the right thing to do. We might also feel God's presence physically.

I have a friend who, when she experiences the Holy Spirit, she just cries for hours sometimes. I had an experience a few years ago when I was preaching at another church.

I'd never been there before and I was preaching on the Holy Spirit. I had to talk to the children before they went out to the kids club and then preach to the adults later on.

But from the minute I got there, things went wrong. I'd taken balloons to use with the children, blowing in the air to represent the Holy Spirit. But a member of congregation was terrified of balloons, so I couldn't use those.

And it was all very disorganised. I didn't know anyone and I just wanted to go home. So I think my prayer must have been that morning. Something like, God, just please help me get through this morning.

[10 : 11] I don't know anyone. I'm really tired. I just want to go home. So I chatted to the children at the front without the balloons. And then I said to the congregation, let's pray for the children.

And as I started to pray for them, I had this burning, tingling feeling across both my shoulders. I'd never had anything like it before. It was like I was enveloped in something.

And it was wonderful. And I was a little bit out of it. And it's really difficult to describe. But that's quite hard when you're leading at the front. So I had to bring myself round a little bit and carry on.

And since then, in prayer or worship, I'll sometimes get a little bit of a tingling in my left shoulder. But of course, being human, I overthink it.

And I think, well, is it God or is it a trap nerve? Because it keeps happening. Should I go to the doctor just to rule that out? So I encourage you this morning for the rest of the service to notice the physical things.

[11 : 17] We will be taking communion this morning. There'll be movement, kneeling, holding out our hands. Some of us feel to reach out our hands in worship or sway or dance.

All ways which God is speaking to us through the emotions or physicality of our prayers. Another way to consider is that God speaks through other people.

And it might be something really specific. Or it might be a few people mention the same thing in a short space of time. And you think, this can't be a coincidence. You might have three people across a few days all tell you you're good at, say, listening.

It might be more than a coincidence. Maybe then it's something to pray about and see where you're led. Not only do we hear God's message through other people, but God uses us to communicate his messages too.

Perhaps you've experienced those times when you feel it right to share something with someone. A picture, a word of encouragement maybe. And while that might take some courage on our part, or we feel self-conscious, or even daft, how amazing is that too, that God can do that through us.

[12 : 39] But there's no one way. Whichever way God chooses to speak, it's not about the way. There's no hierarchy of communication with God.

If we're not careful, we can start to feel a bit inferior. Especially if someone is having regular visions and sharing them from the front. Or I've been at events like Spring Harvest, where everyone around me seems to be encountering God in a very physical way.

As each one of us is unique, our communication with God will be unique and perfectly suited to us. And I think knowing ourselves can really help here.

What makes you come alive? What is your love language? God's communication should make sense to us and who we are.

God's communication should make sense to us and who we are. God's communication should make sense to us and who we are. So, how do we know if it is God or our own thoughts? We have an example in the Old Testament of Samuel.

[13 : 44] You may recall his mother Hannah is called by God to leave her son Samuel at the temple under the training of Eli the priest. And as a child, Samuel heard a voice in the night.

Then the Lord called Samuel. Samuel answered, here I am. And he ran to Eli and said, here I am, you called me. But Eli said, I did not call.

Go back and lie down. So he went and lay down. Three times this happened. Then Eli realised that the Lord was calling the boy. So Eli told Samuel, go and lie down.

And if he calls you, say, speak Lord, for your servant is listening. So Samuel went and lay down in his place.

The Lord came and stood there, calling as at the other times, Samuel, Samuel. Then Samuel said, speak, for your servant is listening.

[14 : 46] So on that occasion, there was an audible voice from God, which is rare. And yet Samuel did not recognise it was God at first.

So how do we discern if something is from God? It might be really clear that you get a sense in your spirit that it is God. But other times doubt might creep in.

I think we can be confident that God's word will always be aligned with the person of Jesus and will be good news. It would manifest in qualities such as truth, kindness, goodness, gentleness and self-control.

If a message leads to negativity, condemnation or a desire to harm, it's likely it's not from God. It helps to look at Jesus, his character, the gospel stories.

Jesus is kind, caring and loving. We'll know it's him speaking if it's kind, caring and loving. But in order to know if this is consistent with Jesus, we need to know Jesus.

[16 : 02] And we do that through prayer and worship. Discerning also comes in community, ultimately the body of Christ, supporting each other, checking out these things with people.

But community requires vulnerability because we have to be prepared to share. Last week we saw vulnerability and bravery from Natalie, Shaz and Holly as they were baptised and shared their testimonies.

I had only met them last week, but felt so drawn towards them because of their honesty and vulnerability. And I've thought a lot about them this week too. Having trusted people within the community that you can talk these things through is a really good idea.

And what if you think God is speaking through you? If you get an inkling to encourage someone. Paul tells us in Thessalonians, encourage one another and build one another up just as you are doing.

Pray about it and encourage them. You might be one piece of the jigsaw that God is trying to communicate with them.

[17 : 26] So, my encouragement this morning to myself and to you is to be intentional, attentive and expectant.

Intentional in how you spend your time. If you're not able to make church, could you catch up on the talk? What books are you reading?

What podcasts are you listening to? Take some space and time. Be attentive. Put yourself in a position to hear.

And lastly, be expectant. God wants to speak to you. To each and every one of us. He knows us.

He loves us. And he wants to be in all the details of our lives. Amen. Amen.