

Tuning In To God: Praying For Direction - 15th October 2023

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[0 : 00] So, good morning everyone. It's a real joy to be with you all this morning. So we're about halfway through our series on tuning into God, which is a series we've been doing on lots of different ways of hearing from God.

Ways God might speak through location, things that might get in the way of hearing from God. And I think it's been really interesting because it's so personal, right? God speaks to us all in such different ways.

And today we're going to talk a bit about hearing from God in times when you're trying to make the right decision. Now, honestly, praying through decision-making times can be one of the most frustrating times to pray because you just want to know what the answer is now.

And ideally you want it to be really, really clear. And I guess as we're talking about praying for direction and decision-making, I want to lay this conversation next to a story from Scripture which some of you may know really well, which is the story of Mary and Martha.

As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. She had a sister called Mary who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said.

[1 : 18] But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself?

Tell her to help me. Martha, Martha, the Lord answered. You are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed, or indeed only one.

Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her. So it's a passage some of us may know well, some of us may find immensely frustrating, because it's a passage where you think, but Martha is getting a lot done, and to be honest, she's probably about to receive not just 12 disciples into her home, but possibly the full 60 hangar hours.

So if you're putting on dinner for 72, and your sister has just sat there, I think that will be really irritating. And of course, Jesus and his disciples didn't work most of the time.

They were called away from their jobs and their families. So as we hear in Luke 8, 1 to 3, Jesus' entire ministry was made possible by the stewardship, mostly of women.

[2 : 37] So there are some named. We have Mary Magdalene and Joanna, and likely Martha. So it's not like Martha's just putting the food on. She's probably one of the key funders who makes Jesus' ministry possible.

She's likely giving him pretty much everything she has, so that all of these disciples can subsist at all. She's an important part of the picture. But even though possibly Martha's making Jesus' ministry possible, Jesus still says Mary's chosen the better part.

So what does that tell us about hearing from God? I think, firstly, it tells us a bit about how God sees us.

God sees us as important because of who we are, and not valuable because of what we can do. Some of us are privileged, and we can do more. And other people struggle to do more.

Sat at Jesus' feet, oblivious to the fact that possibly 72 people are descending for dinner at any moment, not getting anything done. We're still valuable for God. God takes joy in the person you are, above and beyond anything you could possibly do or achieve.

[3 : 48] And for me, this passage also tells me about how God likes to be related to. It's not just about what makes us feel better, or makes us better Christians. God's love language is time and attention.

Like the dog or small baby that just wants to look at you, sometimes for no good reason at all, God longs for times where you just sit there and bask in the glory of God.

Now, Matt had some practical suggestions for how you might do that last week, suggesting that you might find some of that glory, some of that time, sitting under a tree, perhaps. And that sounds wonderful for some people.

For me, sitting still is never going to cut it. I only ever hear God on the move, most gloriously when I'm walking around nowhere in particular. Sometimes, I guess, when I'm swimming as well.

And the honest truth is that making time to just look at God, to be close to God, is one of the things that gets squeezed out of busy lives easily. It becomes much easier to treat God either as an emergency helpline or as a sat-nav.

[4 : 55] Asking for help, reassurance, direction is great. And we do a lot of that in church. But honestly, when I've needed help or direction, better direction and better reassurance have come in the parts of my life where I've had time to invest in a relationship with God, to be present with God and to be filled with the Spirit.

And I guess this is the advantage of focusing on relationship with God, not trying to solve problems, but genuinely be present. Because the deeper your relationship with God, the more you will know deep inside yourself that God loves you, which is often the reassurance that we all need to make risky decisions.

Because the time invested in knowing God deeply will help you know that God wants you to be your best, most content, the most you version of yourself.

And I've also found that it's the case that when people talk to me about praying in the most difficult and dangerous times in their life over decisions that they really struggle to make, that God doesn't really offer them a roadmap out of those difficult times.

Instead, most people who've been in that very dark place say that what they genuinely get from prayer to God is not direction, but a deep, profound knowledge that they are loved and worthy of love, that they are enough.

[6 : 20] Sometimes people talk about being surrounded by warmth or light. And this deep peace and knowledge of God's grace is somehow enough to make the whole situation seem manageable.

It doesn't give you an answer, it doesn't tell you what to do, but it makes it manageable. And I think the other thing I would say about being led by God is that God leads you, but God sees you as you will be, as well as you are, and you only ever get one step at a time.

We'd all like to know where we're going to end up and what the story is going to look like at the end. Me especially, I am tempted to try and map out an entire lifetime at any moment, I would like to know all the details, but you only ever get the next step.

And that's because of so many things. Partly because you're slowly becoming the person who can go on the whole adventure. You might look like this child right now and think, I can't walk up that mountain.

I know some of the places I've ended up would have been terrifying to me if I'd known where I was going at the time, and I might easily have said no to the next step if I knew that I was going to end up over there. We're all called also to be in the place that we are right now.

[7 : 34] Not constantly mapping out the next step. You don't need to fret about the destination. God is never going to let you miss out on the biggest and most exciting journey of your life.

You just have to be where you are right now, doing the best that you can. And when you do get a feeling, I do want to assure you that when God calls you, God calls you as a parent calls a child, that God loves you, and God is always calling you to a greater sense of peace, of love, and of joy in the truest sense of the word.

The second thing I'd say is that when you're asking for direction from God, you need to keep an open mind. Because in my experience, it's been never good to ask God to help you choose between A and B.

Because God's imagination is much bigger and more vibrant and broader than we can imagine. So when asked to choose between A and B, or to line up this nice piece of jigsaw, God instead says, how about C over there?

That's certainly my experience. And if we go back to the Mary and Martha story, then we really see how much bigger Jesus's imagination was than the others at the time. Because women in ancient Israel could do a lot of things.

[8 : 52] I mean, if we look at the wife in Proverbs 31, she's running a multinational import-export business. She has her own earnings, which she uses to buy her own land and plant a vineyard. And she organises a huge staff of people.

But there's one thing that she doesn't get to do. That her husband gets to do. And that's study the scripture at the city gate and spend time talking to people about the law and God.

The wife gets to do everything else so the husband can go and study the scriptures. And this is the kind of model we see Martha doing. Martha is using her wealth, her household, all her resources to release the disciples to study and preach, just like the women in Proverbs.

She probably thinks that's the best and the only way she can serve Jesus. And her stewardship and that of the other women is funding Jesus's ministry and makes it possible. But God's imagination is so much bigger than Martha's and much bigger than the patriarchal norms at the time.

Instead, Jesus says, Mary's entitled to study God, to study the word, just like he sends the woman at the well to be the first apostle and has women who remain faithful to the point of his death as the first disciples to preach the resurrection.

[10 : 06] God's imagination is so much bigger than it was at the time. But remaining open to the breadth of options, broader than we could possibly imagine, that God has for us isn't easy.

Because our imaginations are much more limited. So it's often easy to preempt where God is leading you to. And I guess when I'm talking about this, I want to talk a bit about when people are looking for decision making, sometimes we'll say, it'd be really helpful if there's a sign.

And I must say, as of late, I'm a little bit burned out by signs. Because you have to be a bit careful when looking for signs. Because even when you're confirming the direction you're going in, and even when you talk to other people, what they have to say can be helpful and it can point you in the direction of God.

But sometimes if you just really want something and through longing for it, you can feel like you're seeing signs which confirm what you want to hear. They don't necessarily point you in the way of God.

So the example that comes to mind is one that I struggled with and got totally wrong before curacy. So before I came here, I was leading a missional new monastic community in Bristol.

[11 : 20] Kind of not monks, they're kind of normal people, they just do a lot of praying in their daily life and they kind of eat together. Actually not a million miles off this church and they don't have to obey all the rules of the Church of England so there are perks.

James and I had been a part of this community since we came to Bristol before we were married and we'd come at it when it was in a period of decline which was basically four middle-aged men sitting around a candle and we loved it and it had become this exciting, vibrant space with a daily rhythm of prayer and creative worship and we put on a massive metal mass and invited all of the heavy metal fans in the area to come and there was a band that was doing lots of open mic nights and it became a community of 40 to 50 people.

A community where I taught and led people to baptism with friends that we'd seen through good and hard times. A community with a significant number of homeless people who felt like family often ate in our house and kept us honest.

And so honestly when I was looking for a curacy I thought I really want to be near my community geographically. So I prayed God if this is right if it's right for me to keep doing this give me a church right next door.

And God gave me a church right next door. That was the first offer. It wasn't the right curacy for me but it was right next door to Foundation so I could keep leading the community if I wanted to. I mean that's a sign right.

[12 : 44] And then lots of people came up to me and they said oh we'd love to transition to your church we could just come and make it easy we'll just come with you. We'll all come to your new church and be based in that that feels right to us.

And perhaps that was a sign too that I could just start and my missional community would just come with me and I just keep doing the stuff that I like doing I wouldn't have to do anything new and it would just be very clear what I was doing.

And then it looked like everything was falling into place it was perfect. But James and I prayed about it and it just didn't sit right. We would sit up late into the night talking about it but we knew we wanted to stay for so many reasons for our community for some of the interesting things that we had but we weren't feeling spiritually fed where we were and somehow we felt that the city itself was stifling.

And as we offered it to God it became apparent that God was leading us in a completely different direction even though we felt like we'd received all of these signs. So we said no and then we said we'll jump into the unknown we'll leave Bristol we'll leave the space we know and try and find something new.

I had a sort of vague picture of an evangelical A-frame church but nothing more concrete than that and we jumped out and we came here and that's been perfect for us.

[14 : 06] It has been the right place for us to grow. It's been a place where we felt like we could breathe spiritually where you have loved us where we've put down roots. And I guess that's what it feels like for me when I'm moving in the wrong direction.

It feels just wrong somehow. You can't really put your finger on it but you're up at night thinking this isn't sitting right. It's a bit unsettling. It doesn't feel like there's any peace. It feels kind of anxious, obsessive.

You're kind of going through it. Why is this wrong? What's going wrong? This feels right. Like we felt just before we decided we couldn't stay in Bristol. We couldn't sleep well. We couldn't focus. Something felt off.

Wrong. And so even though we had to pull back from some close relationships and leave painfully it's been right. And I guess making that mistake and starting to think oh we've got the signs we know where we're going allowed us to discover that God had options for us that we couldn't even begin to imagine.

Things that were beyond where we imagined that were even better for us than the things that we would have designed for ourselves. And that's really helped us rely on God a bit more as well.

[15 : 16] So I mean sometimes that's one example. I guess sometimes we're all tempted to see God's signs that other things are that are more painful or more destructive are things that are okay.

And I think things like fear and pride can leave us to make bad decisions. And somehow sometimes God lets us think that those things are signs and make those mistakes. I mean we do have free will after all.

But I find even in these more painful circumstances God lets you make the mistake but always tries to rescue you before the mistake destroys you. But when I am following the path that I believe God wants me to I mostly know it's by its fruit.

And honestly apart from stepping my toe in the water and seeing how it feels as long as it's not hurting anyone or obviously sinful at that point I think that's the way that you know very clearly.

And somehow you can kind of trust that if it's wrong it will kind of shake itself out in what happens next. So there's one church that we went to and it was the right church for us on paper. It was perfect.

[16 : 21] We met the ministry team and they seemed fine so I signed up to help. But the first Sunday morning we went my entire stomach felt wrong. It just felt like completely the wrong place for us and it was the wrong place for us even though we stayed for a whole year.

And as soon as we left there was the peace again so we could find it again even though we persisted keeping going to this wrong down this wrong path for so long. As soon as we turned back we were back on the path that we needed to be.

But when you're in the right place when you're following the path that God longs for you to follow I find it's like drinking from deep still waters. There's a kind of peace that settles over the decision on the path that God is leading us on.

Because ultimately God would never take us on a path that will destroy us. God leads us to the fullest most complete version of ourselves. I mean it's a relationship right?

And like any good relationship what God longs for us for us all is to us to become happy complete whole. God longs for our dreams to be bigger and our joy to be complete.

[17 : 24] And most of all God longs for us all to know God's grace which is that we are enough loved exactly as we are and that God is holding us in God's wide open arms on the cross.

So discernment well I think to discern well in difficult times you need to start by focusing on relationship with God because you need to come from a place of security and peace to be able to make good decisions difficult decisions even if they feel scary and feel confident in the adventure.

But I'd also say don't worry about it too much as long as what you're going to do isn't going to hurt anyone or deceive anyone then have a go but don't worry about where it's going and trust that God will never let you miss out on the biggest adventure of your lives.

And it's never too late to change direction. God is always there in the path at our feet. If you do change direction and leap into the unknown like coming here I can promise you that God's possibilities are more exciting than the ones that you could come up with on your own.

So I think with discernment it seems scary but I guess it's also a call to be excited and adventurous to let that confidence come from knowing the grace of God help you to make the decisions that God is leading you to.