

Listening Prayer

The image features a vertical composition with a warm, orange-toned background. The upper portion is dominated by the text 'Listening Prayer' in a white, sans-serif font. Below the text, the lower two-thirds of the image are filled with the dark silhouettes of numerous bare trees, their intricate branches creating a complex, web-like pattern against the bright, glowing sky. The overall mood is contemplative and serene.

— Listening Prayer —

Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.

— 1 Samuel 3:9 —

When we think about prayer, listening is not generally the first thing that comes to mind. Most of us think of talking — we talk, God listens. It reminds me of the learned professor and the humble monk. The professor had heard of the monk's wisdom and came to visit. But as soon as he arrived, he immediately began to talk about his own opinions and ideas. He talked and talked while the monk quietly listened. The monk politely asked if the professor would like some tea. The professor said, "Yes" and kept on talking. The monk handed the professor a teacup and began to pour from a pot while the professor talked on and on. As the tea rose to the lip of the cup the monk kept pouring while the professor kept talking. Suddenly the professor jumped to his feet and said with a bit of irritation, "*Can't you see that the cup is overflowing?*" The monk calmly replied, "*The cup is like your mind. It can't receive anything new because it's already full.*" The professor had come to "visit" but had no plans to "listen."

When we pray, do we come to talk, or to also listen? Why do we think prayer has ended when we finish talking? And is it not odd that in our relationship with God, even though his words are the most powerful, our words still dominate the prayer? Why do we think of prayer as a monologue, only considering our part of the conversation? True conversation does not take place when only one person speaks. It takes two to have a relationship and a conversation, and if prayer is a conversation, we should learn to quietly and silently listen as well as speak.

Henri Nouwen reminds us that —

The Desert Fathers did not think of solitude as being alone, but as being alone with God. They did not think of silence as not speaking, but as listening to God. Solitude and silence are the context within which prayer is practiced. ¹

Desert Father John Climacus (606 AD) wrote that while "*talkativeness is the darkening of prayer, intelligent silence is the mother of prayer.*" ² Respectful silence gives birth to prayer

THE CONTEXT OF LISTENING PRAYER:

Mark Thibodeaux suggests that prayer evolves through four stages. ³

1. **Talking at God** — Using "ready-made" prayers written by someone else can express what I am feeling. This kind of prayer begins when I am a child and can be enjoyed throughout my life. It can be very helpful to think through prayers written by others.

2. **Talking to God** — Sometimes called “extemporaneous” or “spontaneous” prayers, here I find my own voice and feel comfortable telling God exactly how I feel right now. It is meaningful to know that God wants to hear what is on my mind.
3. **Listening to God** — The sign of a mature person is the ability to stop talking and begin to really listen. My faith matures as I become familiar with God’s voice in scripture, in nature, in life experiences (providence), and in opportunities to be with God’s people or serve in his kingdom. It requires my time, patience, and practice.
4. **Being with God** — Like any intimate relationship, the time comes when simply being in each other’s presence is most important. In a long-term prayer relationship, the words of prayer become less significant. Simply resting in God’s presence is the goal.

***I have calmed and quieted myself,
I am like a weaned child with its mother.***

— Psalm 131:2 —

THE PRACTICE OF LISTENING PRAYER:

Listening to God is not so much a method as it is a relationship. It is a walk together where the relationship grows ever closer, and the thoughts more and more follow the same track. Sometimes words are exchanged on the walk, sometimes the walk is quiet, but always the focus is on God and my relationship with God. To listen in prayer is to receive wisdom by those prepared to obey what they hear. This is what friendship with God means — “*You are my friends if you do what I command*” (John 15:14). Listening Prayer begins and remains rooted in scripture. Consider one or two of the following ideas for your time of Listening Prayer.

1. **The Word** — Read short texts of scripture ... Pause ... Reflect ... Listen. Note which passage gets your attention. What resonates, intrigues, or confronts you? Ask, “*Lord, what do you want me to find/see/hear in this text?*” Allow time for silent listening.
2. **The Wait** — Do we believe God can be at work while we are at rest, or do we think we have to be busy for him to work? “*When you are on your beds, search your hearts and be silent*” (Psalm 4:4). “*Be still and know that I am God*” (Psalm 46:10). The Jerusalem Bible translates this as “*pause awhile.*” This waiting shows itself in prayer with a heart that expects God to provide, to give, to share. Ask God, “*What do you want me to experience?*” And then pause, wait, listen.
3. **The Thanksgiving** — Keep a growing list of names, scriptures, hymns, and insights for which you are grateful. Slowly review and picture God’s joy and presence.
4. **The Requests** — Picture the faces of people you love. Enjoy thinking about them. Ask God to strengthen and guide them and

then wait to see if you are moved to be a part of God's answer. Take joy in God's presence and pause, waiting and listening. Ask for his strength, wisdom, and guidance. Ask and then patiently listen before you move on.

5. **The Forgiveness** — With Jesus' prayer in mind ("*forgive us ... as we forgive*") consider the following thoughts:

"Forgive Me" — Listen for your sins to come to mind and know that God forgives you.

"Forgive Them" — Look for the faces of those who hurt you. Resolve to forgive.

"Protect Me" — Ask God to bring to mind your vulnerable places. Face them honestly.

"Protect Them" — Picture God using you to serve and help the people you encounter each day.

For Each of These — Ask ...Listen ...Wait ...Visualize ...
Receive ...Give Thanks.

LISTENING PRAYERS IN SCRIPTURE:

WAITING

Psalm 37:7 — *Be still before the LORD and wait patiently for him.*

Psalm 62:1, 5 — *Truly my soul silently waits for God ...*

My soul, wait silently for God alone, for my expectation is from Him.

Proverbs 8:34 — *Blessed are those who listen to me, watching daily at my doors, waiting at my doorway.*

Psalm 33:20 — *We wait in hope for the LORD; he is our help and our shield.*

Psalm 130:5-6 — *I wait for the LORD, my whole being waits, and in his word I put my hope. I wait for the Lord, more than watchmen wait for the morning, more than watchmen wait for the morning.*

Romans 8:25 — *But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.*

RESTING

Psalm 62:5 — *Yes, my soul, find rest in God; my hope comes from him.*

Psalm 116:7 — *Return to your rest, my soul, for the LORD has been good to you.*

ENJOYING

Psalm 16:11 — *You make known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence.*

Psalm 37:4 — *Take delight in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart.*

Isaiah 61:10 — *I delight greatly in the Lord; my soul rejoices in my God.*

Philippians 4:4 — *Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!*

THE RESULT OF LISTENING PRAYER:

Listening Prayer can quiet our hearts and help us to listen for God's voice. It allows him to set the agenda for prayer. As Henri Nouwen has written, "*The 'real' work of prayer is to become silent and listen.*"⁴

*The word wait comes from a root word meaning "to watch." Originally to wait meant to apply attentiveness or watchfulness throughout a period of time and was a highly regarded experience. To wait on God meant to watch keenly for God's coming. Watchers and waiters were nearly synonymous.*⁵

1. **A MORE PEACEFUL LIFE** — Living life in a slower, more thoughtful manner can help us become more aware of God's constant presence. Walking through life with a listening frame of mind can teach us to wait on God, and to trust his timing. "*Waiting is giving God room. It cannot tolerate trying to drag God down out of the heavens on cue.*"⁶
2. **REVEALS MY HEART** — Silence is not always comfortable, but if we allow it to exist, not covering it up with noise and busyness, God can use our silent moments to show us what is inside. Emilie Griffin puts it this way —

*In silence we put ourselves in touch with God and also with our deeper selves. Thoughts long buried come to the surface. Long-repressed feelings bubble up. Silence exposes certain issues in our lives, and almost without effort, what is most important comes to the forefront.*⁷

Through my willing silence God can research my heart and lovingly (though sometimes painfully) face me with myself. But will I have the courage to listen? As Jesus says, "*Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear*" (Mark 4:9, 23).

3. **HEARING GOD** — If we think God's **thoughts** (Phil 4:8) and allow his Spirit to occupy our **soul** (Act 2:38), if we listen to his **words** (Rom 10:17) and adopt his manner of **life** (1 Cor 6:20), if we allow him to enlighten our **hearts** (Eph 1:18) and transform our **minds** (Eph 4:23), then we can recognize his **voice** (God's will). As Paul said, "*offer your bodies*" "*worship*" "*don't conform*" "*be transformed*" "*then you will know ... God's will.*" (Rom 12:1-2).

4. **GROWTH AND CHANGE** — Listening prayer speaks to the information/transformation issue. We have the information. We know how we should live, and yet it is so difficult for us to live by our own standards. But sitting quietly in God's restful presence, waiting, listening, and pondering God's will for our lives can slowly bring our hearts into alignment with his heart until we find ourselves doing what we at first found to be so difficult. C. S. Lewis described this process —

*A good many people have been bothered by ... our Lord's words, "Be ye perfect." Some people seem to think this means, "Unless you are perfect, I will not help you" ... But I do not think He did mean that. I think He meant, "The only help I will give is help to become perfect. You may want something less: but I will give you nothing less ..." The moment you put yourself in My hands, that is what you are in for.*⁸

5. **A DEEPER LISTENING HEART** — "We get better at what we repeatedly do" is a principle I have found to be true in sports, education and, in this discussion, silence. As we become more comfortable with a quiet, listening style of prayer we discover that "There is no path to God that is not first God's path to us."⁹ God has been there all along, omnipresent, everywhere, seeking us, all the time. And our quiet, reflective moments in God's presence can open our blind eyes. And so, David writes, "For God alone my soul waits in silence" (Psalm 62:1 ESV). A heart that is learning to listen is "ushered into ... 'the prayer of quiet' ... a listening stillness."¹⁰ One of my elders recently gave an analogy for this quiet, listening relationship with God — "It is like the silent companionship of my grandson sitting next to me, leaning his head against my head showing trust, safety and love — all without words."¹¹

Listening Prayer enjoys the presence of God — watching, waiting, expecting, listening.

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- 1 Henri Nouwen, The Way of the Heart (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 1991), p. 69.
 - 2 John Climacus, The Ladder of Divine Ascent (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1982), p. 158.
 - 3 Mark Thibodeaux, Armchair Mystic (Cincinnati, OH: Franciscan Media, 2001), pgs. 13-27
 - 4 Henri Nouwen, Life of the Beloved: Spiritual Living in a Secular World (New York, NY: The Crossroad Publishing Co, 1993), p. 62.
 - 5 Sue Monk Kidd, When the Heart Waits (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 1992), p. 132.
 - 6 Howard R. Macy, Rhythms of the Inner Life (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1988), p. 57.
 - 7 Emilie Griffin, Doors into Prayer (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2001), p. 35.
 - 8 C. S. Lewis, Mere Christianity (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 1952), p. 201.
 - 9 Douglas Steere ed., Great Devotional Classics: Bernard of Clairvaux (Nashville, TN: The Upper Room, 1961), p. 5.
 - 10 Richard Foster, Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 1992), p. 162.
 - 11 Charles Johnston, Small Group Discussion (Dallas, TX, May 2022).

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