Listening to God

a conversation series for Small Groups
reGroup Fall 2015

This Series was written & assembled by Ryan Porche,
Small Groups Minister for the Southwest Church of Christ

With contributions from:
Brian Mashburn, Teaching Minister for the Southwest Church of Christ
Charles Kiser, Ministry Team Leader for the Storyline Christian Community

For further reading:
Hearing God by Dallas Willard
The Power of a Whisper by Bill Hybels

A Note to Group Facilitators:
This Conversation Series lends itself to sharing a spiritual practice together as a group. We have listed some suggestions at the end of this study.
You might review those first in order to better plan your gatherings (one of the exercises would be offsite, so be sure to give your group plenty of notice).
You may want your 3rd or 4th gathering to include one of these practices.

These texts are merely guides for your conversations.
You may choose to follow them exactly, or you may adapt them as you deem best.
They are designed to last one hour.
Read (or paraphrase) the Following Aloud: Welcome! We’re so glad to be together tonight for the first time this school year! As you know, reGroup is what we call the first 4 weeks of our Small Groups each Fall. Besides helping new people connect to groups, reGroup serves a special purpose as we all share the same conversations about faith together. This year, the reGroup Conversation Series is about Listening to God. Each Sunday, Brian Mashburn will preach on the topic, and then every Small Group will continue the conversation.

Read the Following Aloud: Hearing from God. Many people assume that such a notion is reserved only for crazy people or that it’s simply not possible. But what if it was? What if God really wants to speak…to you? Does God still speak to people today? If so, how does He speak? How do we listen? How do we know if we’re hearing God or not? Questions like these will frame our discussions for the next four weeks.

Pray: Let’s pray together and then we’ll begin.

Icebreaker: What would you say God wants from you more than anything else? (Allow several people to answer this question.)

Scripture Reading: Have someone read John 17:1-3 aloud.

Discussion Questions:

• In this text (along with others), the “eternal life” Jesus describes seems to be a present reality as much as a future reality. How does this present reality change our expectations about the kind of relationship we can experience with God today?
• The word “know” in verse 3 does not refer to head knowledge, but it refers to intimate friendship—to know God personally rather than knowing about God. What might an intimate friendship with God look like?

Read the Following Aloud: In his book, Hearing God, Dallas Willard writes: “God has created us for intimate friendship with himself—both now and forever. This is the Christian viewpoint. It is made clear throughout the Bible, especially in passages such as Exodus 29:43-46, 33:11, Psalm 23, Isaiah 41:8, John 15:14 and Hebrews 13:5-6. As with all close personal relationships, God can be counted on to speak to each of us when and as it’s appropriate” (Hearing God, [InterVarsity Press, 2012], p. 11-12).

Discussion Question:

• Willard joins the language of Jesus by describing a personal relationship with God. If this relationship is what we were created for, how does listening to God become important?

Application Questions:

• What has kept you from expecting to hear from God?
• How have you struggled to believe God genuinely desires an intimate friendship with you?
• As we embark in this conversation series about listening to God, what hopes do you have for your own spiritual growth?
• What next step will you take this week to better engage in a conversational relationship with God?
**Listening to God Week #2**
**How God Speaks**

**Framing:** Welcome! We’re in the midst of a conversation series about Listening to God. Last week, we talked about how listening to God is an important part of our life of faith, because—more than anything—God desires an intimate friendship with all of us. Next week, we’ll talk about how we listen. But today, we’re going to unpack more of how God communicates with us.

**Pray:** Let’s pray as we begin.

**Icebreaker:** What have been your primary reasons for seeking to hear from God? (guidance for a decision, seeking scripture understanding, struggling with sin, etc.)

**Read the Following Aloud:** When thinking about hearing from God, we often think in terms of receiving specific guidance or specific directions. While God can communicate to us for this purpose, we must remember His bigger purpose—to transform our character so that we can make our own God-honoring decisions without His specific instruction.

Hear these words from E. Stanley Jones: “Obviously God must guide us in a way that will develop spontaneity in us. The development of character, rather than direction in this, that, and the other matter, must be the primary purpose of the Father. He will guide us, but He won’t override us….Suppose a parent would dictate to the child minutely everything he is to do during the day. The child would be stunted under that regime. The parent must guide in such a manner, and to the degree, that autonomous character, capable of making right decisions for itself, is produced. God does the same.” (“For Sunday of Week 41,” in *Victorious Living* [Nashville: Abingdon, 1938], p. 281.)

**Discussion Question:**
- Willard and Jones both suggest that God’s priority is more about our ongoing character development, and less about providing specific directions. How is this different from what you’ve previously understood?
- God will not always provide specific directions for our decisions. In what ways is this disappointing, and in what ways is this freeing?

**Scripture Reading:** Have someone read (or several people divide and read) John 14:15-20, 25-28; 15:26, 7-15.

**Read the Following Aloud:** The Spirit re-shapes our narratives—our understanding of God, ourselves, and the world. We are transformed from the inside out as the Spirit guides us more and more into truth.

**Discussion Questions:**
- According to Jesus, what role does the Holy Spirit play when we listen to God?
- What might it look like for the Holy Spirit to guide us into help us find the greater truths of God?
- In his sermon, Brian Mashburn suggested that God primarily speaks through scripture, prayer, circumstances, and people. How have you experienced this to be true?
- God can communicate with us in a variety of forms. For some, it’s an audible voice. For others, his communication comes as new thoughts. Sometimes, God seems to speak directly through another person. We don’t fully understand how God communicates with us, but as Walter Brueggemann once said, “stuff comes to us.” Describe one method you believe God has used to communicate with you.
- As you go with God this week, how might you need to adjust what you expect to receive from Him?
Listening to God Week #3
How We Listen

**Framing:** Welcome! We’re in the midst of a conversation series about Listening to God. In week #1, we talked about how listening to God is an important part of our life of faith, because—more than anything—God desires an intimate friendship with all of us. Last week, we talked about how God’s purpose in communicating with us is more about our ongoing character transformation and less about specific guidance. Today, we’re going to unpack more about how we listen to God.

**Pray:** Let’s pray and then we’ll begin.

**Icebreaker:** In one word, how would you describe your experience of listening to God? (Then tell us a little bit about why you choose that word.)

**Read the Following Aloud:** When it comes to hearing from God, one question often surfaces: even if God did speak, would I even hear Him? And more concerning: what if God has already been speaking to me and I’ve missed Him? We can take comfort remembering that our relationship with God will develop and deepen like any relationship. In other words, our relationship grows over time, and our ability to hear from God will grow with practice. We must seek to grow in our ability to attend to God—and this takes practice. By examining scripture and thousands of years of Christian practice, we learn how spiritual practices (or disciplines) help us grow in our ability to attend to God.

**Discussion Questions:**

- How would you summarize your experiences with spiritual disciplines?
- How have you found it difficult to engage in spiritual practices?

**Read the Following Aloud:** Let’s explore some examples from scripture of people engaging with God through spiritual practices.

**Scripture Readings (have different people read these passages aloud):**

- A call to stillness: Psalm 46.
Discussion Questions:
- Describe the example set by Jesus from the passages we read. What do we learn from His example?
- How do you think spiritual practices such as these help us be more attentive to God?

Read the Following Aloud: The Spirit works in our practices to help us grow.
When we read scripture, the Spirit guides our attention and may cause a phrase or an idea to stand out to us. Scripture teaches that the Spirit prays with us and for us (Romans 8:26). The Spirit guides us in our spiritual practices to learn and discover, and it provides encouragement and comfort. These practices create space for the Spirit to work within us, and they provide space for us to pay better attention. The more we engage, the better we will become at attending to the Spirit’s work in and through us.

Discussion Questions:
- Here are some common practices associated with receiving from God: journaling, spending time in nature, solitude, forms of centering and listening prayer, fasting, stillness, lectio divina (a form of scripture meditation), worship, and sabbath. Which of these might God be calling you to practice?
- What further resources do you need to engage in a spiritual practice? (Time, information, guidance, a companion for the experience, a journal, etc.) How can we help one another get what we need?
- What next step can you take this week to grow in your ability to attend to God?

Group Leaders: Consider having the entire group engage in one spiritual discipline during the week, and then take time at the beginning next week to report and reflect on the experience together.

Recommended further reading:
- The Good and Beautiful God, by James Bryan Smith
- Celebration of Discipline, by Richard Foster
- Spiritual Disciplines Handbook, by Adele Ahlberg Calhoun.
Framing: Welcome! Today, we’re wrapping up our conversation series about Listening to God. In week #1, we talked about how listening to God is an important part of our life of faith, because—more than anything—God desires an intimate friendship with all of us. In week #2, we talked about how God’s purpose in communicating with us is more about our ongoing character transformation and less about specific guidance. Last week, we talked about spiritual practices which can help us grow in our ability to attend to God. As we finish tonight, we’re going to talk about whether or not we actually want to hear from God in the first place.

Pray: Let’s pray and then we’ll begin.

Icebreaker: What person (if anyone) knows you better than you know yourself? Why?

Read the Following Aloud: As we have discussed, God created us for friendship with Him forever. And God’s goal for each of us is our transformation into the image of His Son. Personal change is inherent to this idea. It’s strange, really—as much as we may like the idea of becoming more like Jesus, we simultaneously remain resistant to personal change. This tension brings us to our topic for tonight. Let’s not kid ourselves, hearing from God can be highly disruptive. We may not like what we hear. God may call us to new levels of discomfort and sacrifice. But God has long been in the business of changing lives, and He’s really good at it. Besides, what He has in store for us could also be the greatest adventures of our lives!

Discussion Questions:
• What gives you hesitation about actually hearing from God?
• In what ways have you struggled to believe God truly knows what is best for you?
• If you were to hear from God, how would you describe your willingness to believe Him and obey?
• How does relating to God as a Loving Father help or hurt your willingness to hear from Him?

Scripture Reading: Have someone read Psalm 139 aloud.

Discussion Questions:
• In what ways do you hear echoes of friendship between the writer and God?
• The writer seems to assume that God will let the Psalmist know what he finds in the Psalmist’s heart (vv. 23-24). How does God speak to us by making us self-aware?
• Re-read the last two verses. How willing are you to pray these same words for yourself? How well do you trust God’s ability to lovingly shepherd your transformation?
• How has this conversation series influenced your own heart’s desire to hear from God?
• How do you sense God might be calling you to grow in your ability to attend to Him?
• What next step could you take this week to make your heart ready to receive?
A note to leaders: Remember, spiritual practices are exactly that—they are designed to help us practice. As we lean into hearing from God, remind your group that it’s perfectly okay if they do not receive from God. We are practicing.

Letter writing. Provide 2-3 pieces of paper for everyone and a pen. Instruct everyone to take 10 minutes to write a letter to God. Then, instruct everyone to take another 10 minutes and write what they imagine God’s response letter might be. Then allow a final 10 minutes for people to share what this exercise was like for them. (Remember, if it was no good for someone—that’s okay—it’s just an exercise. Remind the group how a wide variety of spiritual practices exist, and different practices will connect with different people.)

Lectio Divina: Lectio Divina literally means “divine reading.” The idea of this exercise is to meditate on a small portion of scripture by reading it three times very slowly, and allowing time for silent reflection between each reading. The hope is for the Holy Spirit to cause a word, phrase, or idea to capture our attention. Many passages work well for this exercise, but consider these suggestions: Psalm 139:23-24, Matthew 14:22-32, Matthew 16:21-27, John 1:1-14, Colossians 1:15-20, 1 John 4:7-16. Take a few minutes to unpack what the exercise was like for the people in your group.

Centering Prayer: Centering Prayer is an ancient prayer practice designed to help us become quiet, still, and attentive to God. The practice aspires to help us re-center our thoughts on Jesus. Psalm 62:1: My soul finds rest in God alone. Basically, Centering Prayer is a time extended silence in order to listen. Part of what makes this hard, is our culture of screens causes our brains to run many directions at once. So before beginning, have each person settle into a comfortable sitting position and choose one word for focusing purposes (examples: love, peace, grace, Jesus, forgiveness, mercy, Shepherd, Bread of Life, etc.). Set a timer for 10 minutes (you’ll soon understand why this takes practice!). Instruct everyone to intentionally settle their thoughts in the presence of God and the very center of His love. Distractions will be abundant, but cast them aside and return to your focus word as an aide against them. As time continues, your focus should improve. Enjoy just being with Jesus. Just rest...be still...and listen. You may hear from Him and you may not—either is fine. Sometimes simply being together means the world. Take a few minutes to unpack what the exercise was like for the people in your group.

Stations of the Cross (off-site): Consider hosting your Small Group gathering at the giant cross off of I-40 at Groom, TX (45 minute drive from the church building; Cross Ministries, 2880 County Road 2, Groom, TX 79039)(http://www.crossministries.net). Here, friends have constructed sculptures depicting some of Jesus' final moments. Instruct group members to start at the first sculpture, and then to move silently through the stations one by one, taking time to read the placards and meditate on the experiences of Jesus. The idea here, is to “journey with Jesus.” As we walk, we pray and we listen. Perhaps God will speak to your heart as you meditate on the saving work of Jesus.