

PRAYER: GOD SPEAKS

by Rev. Elaine Poproski

I'm going to read you a story from Craig Springer. He's the Executive Director of Alpha in the US and just published a great book titled, *How To Revive Evangelism*. This story isn't about evangelism; it's about prayer. I wonder if any part of this story will grab you, or resonate with you. We'll have a chance to reflect on those things when I'm done reading the story. It's a longish story. About 5 or 6 minutes. It reads this way:

My son's faith was on autopilot... He grew up in the church, knew the Bible inside out, and had absorbed more information about Christianity than just about anyone else his age. It's possible he knew more than many adult Christians. I had intentionally tried to make sure the beauty of the Christian faith was accessible to him from the time he was born. We prayed together; we read the Bible together; we had spiritual conversations often. As a Christian father, one of the things I care most about is introducing my own children to Jesus in a way that will lead them into a lifelong relationship with him.

And yet.

There was simply no real evidence that my son had grown to deeply embrace any of it. I'm not saying he was turning into a rebel. but the Christian spirituality that developed as he grew up was primarily a head-level, cultural kind of faith. He knew the words to the worship songs, but I wasn't sure they had penetrated his heart. He knew what to say and when to say it, but I wasn't always so sure he actually believed it. He knew the answers to most of the questions, but I wondered if he was simply saying what I wanted him to say.

Something seemed to be missing; and I wondered if he had a heart-level relationship with his Creator.

My son didn't seem to enjoy church that much, or many things connected to faith, but he happened to be born into a family where faith mattered, so he continued to show up and do what was expected of him. He went through the motions. He rarely complained. But I could tell that he didn't have much genuine interest when it came to connecting with God.

When I realized this about my son, I started praying for him more intently, more deliberately, more consistently than I had ever prayed for anything before. I would

close my eyes at night and see his face, remember what he had been like as a toddler and a preschooler, and I hoped his heart would turn toward the Lord. I prayed over and over again that the content that had seeped into him through the years would materialize and become meaningful.

This realization about my son came over a period of time, but it all seemed to culminate for me on a prayer and worship night at our church. We were having a series of meetings designed for people to take some time and draw closer to God, and during one of those services, my desire for my son to experience God overwhelmed me. It was a deeper longing than I had ever known before, that his heart would be captured by Jesus. It was a visceral sensation; one I could feel deep in my gut.

On that night, I entered into this space of deep travail and earnest prayer at a level I'd not known. I pleaded. I prayed. I worshiped. I begged. Again and again and again. In the midst of this deep and meaningful moment, the Holy Spirit's voice emerged. I got the message loud and clear, but it was a message I hadn't expected.

What you see in him is what I see in you.

Wait, I thought, What are you saying, God?

What you see in him is what I see in you. You see a surface-level faith in your son, but why would he have anything else, when that's what you have – a surface-level faith.

It was so clear to me what the Holy Spirit was saying, and it cut right to my heart.

This going through the motions, this head-level discipleship, this mediocre hunger for the Lord isn't just his problem. It's yours too. The lack of intimacy with God, the shallow experiences of his presence, the quick prayers, the run-of-the-mill desires...this isn't just in the life of this person you care about.

It's all through your life too.

I physically collapsed on the floor. I was broken open in prayer for the sake of my own soul, not for my salvation, but simply because I had lost my first love. I realized in that moment that I had become lukewarm.

If I wanted my son to come alive in Christ, I couldn't simply hope for that to happen for him – I needed to hunger for more, for me.

This changed the trajectory of my life.

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So, what happened with my son and me?

Well, I took the word of the Holy Spirit seriously – I started to seek God through various spiritual disciplines. I stopped focusing on my son’s relationship with God (although I never stopped incessantly praying for him) and became more concerned with my own journey with Jesus. I began seeking revival inside me.

And I experienced a spiritual renewal unlike anything I had experienced before in my life.

Soon after that, I began to see movement in the faith of my son. It started small. It wasn’t anything remarkable, not at first, but we actually started praying together regularly. We traveled as a family to the home of the Alpha program in England, and during that trip, I had the opportunity to witness a deepening of his faith.

When we returned from the trip, my son decided on his own that he wanted to be baptized... My son is praying and reading Scripture regularly with me and has had an alive relationship with Jesus since that time.¹

There’s a lot in this story from Craig Springer. Was there anything particular that grabbed you? that resonated with you? Let’s take a moment right now to sit with whatever it was that struck you in this story. If you’d be willing to share with the group briefly, that would be great. You can share out loud, or in the chat if you’d prefer. Or not at all. Maybe you just need to reflect quietly on your own for a minute. So let’s take a moment of quiet, and then we’ll hear from anyone willing to share out loud or in the chat.

Pause for a minute.

Invite people to share anything that struck them in the story.

I chose for us to spend some time with this story this morning, because of something in it that struck me. The thing I was struck by was the underlying, foundational hearing-from-God piece. As Craig tells the story, it was when God interrupted Craig’s talking, that things began to change. It was when Craig stopped and listened, that his prayers began to be answered.

This is the thing about prayer that I think we sometimes skip over. We pray. We talk to God. We ask for things, we tell him our troubles, we tell him other people's troubles, we thank him for things, we praise him and name all sorts of things that are great about him. But when it comes to listening... that's really hard.

It would be so much easier if God spoke in an out loud voice just like people speak, even if we couldn't see him – like he was speaking from a burning bush or a cloud. Or even if it wasn't a voice, wouldn't it be great if he wrote it out right in front of us? There's a story in Daniel 5 of a huge feast happening in Babylon, when a king named Belshazzar was ruler. Right in the middle of the feast, “the fingers of a human hand appeared and wrote on the plaster of the wall” (Daniel 5:5). The hand was God's. The words were God's message to the king. Wouldn't it be great if God talked to us that way? It might be a bit scary, sure, but at least we'd know that God was speaking to us.

A couple weeks ago I talked about knowing God versus knowing *about* God. I talked about the criteria for knowing someone, including that that someone must intentionally choose to share things about him/herself with us as individuals, and we must be able to understand what they're sharing. To know God requires not just that God share things about himself with us, but that we understand what he's sharing – that we hear it and make sense of it. To do that, we have to stop talking and listen. Just like we have to do with any person we want to know.

But here's the thing: the burning bush, the writing on the wall – these aren't the norm. Which is why listening to and hearing from God is hard. It's hard to quiet ourselves enough to hear. It's hard to differentiate between our own ideas and thoughts and those that come from God. It's hard to know what we're even supposed to be “listening” for, given that God doesn't usually talk to us in an out loud voice. But if listening to God – if knowing God – really is foundational to all the rest of it – all the things we pray for, all the things it means to being a Christian – then it's something we must learn; it's something we must practice.

As we go through this whole series of sermons about Friendship with God – about knowing God – it's important for us to recognize that each week builds on the last. Not just what I preach on Sunday, but the things I'm suggesting we try practicing during the week. Here's what I mean:

The first two weeks of this series I talked about knowing God. And both those weeks, the thing I suggested you do between Sundays was read or recite the words

of Psalm 42:1-2 over and over again whenever you're standing in front of your bathroom mirror. *As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.*

The reason this is where we began, is because the first thing required of knowing God, is that we want to know God. If you're still not sure you want to know God – or you're not sure you want to do what's required to know God, then just keep praying these words, even if the prayer is telling God you don't want to know him, but you want to want to know him. That's where we start. *As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God.*

If you're there. If you do want to know God. Then we talk about prayer. Because prayer is, most simply, that thing that brings us into communion with God. Prayer is the place where this knowing God thing happens. And while it's great that we pray whenever it occurs to us to do so, to really know God, we need to be intentional and consistent about incorporating prayer into our daily life. We need to develop the discipline of prayer. And we do this by setting time and space apart for prayer. This is hard. It may be that all you can manage as you begin is 3 minutes a day. Take it. Schedule it. Every day, commit to talking to God for 3 minutes. This is what I suggested you work toward this past week. And it's what I'm going to suggest you continue working toward this week.

So now we talk about listening to God. Which is part of prayer. In fact, it's foundational to prayer. It underlies the way we pray for ourselves, for other people, for our world. It is in listening that we begin to truly know God.

Lately I've been reading some things by Dallas Willard, an American philosopher-theologian who wrote some really helpful things about Spiritual Disciplines, and more specifically, about hearing God. One of the points he makes about hearing God is that there's a kind of paradox at work. "On the one hand, we have this massive testimony to...God's personal, guiding communication with us... On the other hand, we also find a pervasive and often painful uncertainty about how hearing God's voice actually works... Even those who firmly believe that they have been addressed or directly spoken to by God may be at a loss to know what is happening or what to do about it."ⁱⁱⁱ

Listening to God is hard. If we're honest, listening to people can be hard. How often, in conversation with someone, do we find ourselves thinking about what we're going to say instead of really listening to what the other person is saying? And that's with a physical person who's talking out loud. Given that God doesn't

usually talk out loud to us, no wonder it's hard to hear him – to listen to him. But it's not impossible. There are things we can do – things we can learn – to help us listen. If we practice those things, we will find ourselves increasingly attuned to his voice. Author Leanne Payne suggests that as we practice listening to God, we are exercising our spiritual ears.ⁱⁱⁱ And just like physical exercise improves our capacity for physical things, so exercising our spiritual ears improves our capacity for hearing God all through the day.

I think the best place to start, when we're talking about listening to God, is with the Bible. Rather than being some dusty old document from ancient times, the Bible is a living document. The words may have been spoken and written millennia ago, but the Holy Spirit inhabits them just as the Spirit inhabits us, breathing life and meaning into the words of the Bible such that they become God's Word to us, millennia after they were written.

It's true that reading the Bible is no guarantee that we'll hear from God. It's also true that lots of people, for as long as the Bible has been around, have claimed to hear God through it, while at the same time twisting it into a weapon against whomever they please. But that doesn't negate the truth that God speaks through the Bible. That if we listen well to Scripture, we will hear him. It just means we absolutely must come to Scripture with humility. We must come prepared to have our preconceived ideas and assumptions uncovered and challenged. It means we must listen from within the context of Christian community.

I know that last point might be a bit controversial – that we must listen from within the context of Christian community – by which I mean a community of Jesus' followers who are also committed to knowing God. It's one thing to talk about doing this listening-to-God thing in the privacy of my own home, but to share it with other people? That's a scary thing. We're talking about sharing some of the most real, most honest things about ourselves with other people. And yet, how else do we weed through our own assumptions and biases, how else do we weed through the assumptions and biases of the culture and society in which we're embedded? Unless we do so in the context of other people who are also committed to knowing God as Jesus knew God? This is the essence of humility.

My dream for Walmer is that we would be the kind of Christian community in which people feel safe enough to share honestly whatever it is they think they're hearing from God. My dream for Walmer is that we would be the kind of Christian community in which we don't shy away from challenging each other if we disagree about whether or not something is from God. My dream for Walmer is that we

would be the kind of Christian community in which the practice of listening to God moves from just being a personal thing, to being a communal thing – that together we would hear, understand, and live out God’s Word.

We may not be there yet. But if we’re willing to humbly risk sharing what we’re practicing and experiencing with each other, I believe we will get there. We will become the kind of community of faith in which people can truly grow to know God. What an extraordinary and important thing that will be to share with our neighbours and our city!

But for now, let’s return to listening to God. Let’s begin by learning and practicing sitting before Scripture, to wait and hear whatever it is God has to say.

Next week I’m going to delve into this more deeply, but I’d like for us to start practicing listening for God through Scripture this week. Here’s what I’d like us to do:

Let’s use Psalm 130.

Every day, spend a bit of time (let’s try for 5 minutes if you managed 3 minutes this past week, or 10 would be great). However long you can manage, take Psalm 130 and read it out loud.

Read it slowly, listening to the words as you speak them. Just listen. And pay attention to anything that grabs your attention as you read. Maybe it’s a word or an image. Just note it. It would be great if you had some paper and a pen handy.

Read Psalm 130 again. Is there anything that grabs you? that stops you in your tracks? that captures your imagination? Make a note of it. You may find yourself repeating the words of one part of the psalm over and over again. Go with it. You may find yourself lost in a thought or imagining something inspired by what you read. That’s o.k. Let yourself be lost in it for a bit.

When you’re done, thank God for being present with you in the reading, regardless of whether or not you think he spoke to you. Regardless of whether or not anything in the psalm grabbed you at all.

And then do it all again the next day, with the same psalm.

Toward the end of the week, share whatever you’ve been experiencing – whatever grabbed you or captured your imagination – regardless of whether or not you think

God was actually speaking to you. Choose someone who also listens to God, and share your experience with that person. Ideally, choose someone from within Walmer. Don't worry about coming to any conclusions. Just share what you experienced. It might be risky, but this is what it means to be the church.

ⁱ Craig Springer. *How to Revive Evangelism: 7 Vital Shifts in How We Share Our Faith*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Reflective, 2021), 21-41.

ⁱⁱ Dallas Willard. *Hearing God: Developing a Conversational Relationship with God*. Updated and Expanded edition. (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Books, 2012), 30.

ⁱⁱⁱ Leanne Payne. *Listening Prayer*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1994), 20.