



Listening Prayer

by JENNIFER KENNEDY DEAN

The Spirit's quiet whisper
Bids me bow before Your throne
'Till my heart's deepest yearnings
Are the echo of Your own
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SPOKEN PRAYER WILL NOT REACH ITS POTENTIAL unless it is grounded in listening prayer. In listening prayer, spoken prayer is born.


The most limiting misconception about prayer is that its secret lies in the words we sandwich between “Dear God” and “Amen.” We devote ourselves to a method—the right words said in the right order at the right time of day—instead of devoting ourselves to the Master. We miss out on that for which God put prayer into His cosmic plan in the first place. He wants full possession of your heart. He wants you to live in the experience of His love for you. “Prayer... is the opening of a channel from your emptiness to God’s fullness.” (E. Stanley Jones, *Abundant Living*).

God has so much more to give us than just those things we know to ask Him for. He wants to give us Himself. He wants to live in such intimacy with us that we realize He is nearer than our own heartbeat. He wants us to know His secrets, but His secrets come wrapped in silence.

His Face

Here is the longing that calls us into listening prayer. “Show me your face, let me hear your voice; for your voice is sweet, and your face is lovely” (Song 2:14). We are pulled irresistibly as He “... calls us by his own glory and





goodness” (2 Peter 1:3). He is His own draw. The closer we get, the closer we long to be.

“When You said, ‘Seek My face,’ my heart said to You, ‘Your face, O Lord, I shall seek’” (Ps. 27:8, NAS). Do you see? He invites me and my heart is captured. The longing I have for Him is the echo of the longing He has for me.


He invites me to seek His face. The most intimate and the most genuine communication is with the face. The expression on a person’s face, the look in his eye, can change the whole tone of a message. When we experience an emotion, a message is sent to the facial muscles. The face cannot lie. A person may school himself to quickly rearrange his facial expression, but he cannot keep his face from momentarily registering the truth. The science of reading facial muscles has been reduced to a system called the Facial Action Coding System—the science of reading faces. The face speaks more clearly than the choice of words or than the inflections of the voice.

“Seek My face,” He says. To read a face, you have to be up close, where you can see the fleeting expression or the slightest twitch of a muscle. You must be focused on that face to the exclusion of all else. You must watch that face until its every emotion has been memorized. In listening prayer, seek His face.

Wordless Prayer

All noise all the time. Noise is more portable than ever before, and becomes more so every day. Thanks to cell phones, PDAs, notebook computers, and a never-ending parade of gadgets, we never have to be left out of the noise-stream. Yet, it is in silence and solitude that we learn to synchronize our hearts with His. The very silence that has become so elusive in our world is the essential element for you who want to move from “saying prayers” to living in a abandoned intimacy with the One for whom your heart is made. Richard Foster says, “Contemplative Prayer immerses us into the silence of





God. How desperately we in the modern world need this wordless baptism”
(Richard J. Foster, *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home*).

The reason for my wordlessness is so that He can breathe His words into my thoughts. His desires become the mold in which my desires are shaped. I wait quietly in His presence so that He can speak order and form and truth into the chaos of my frenetic life.

I come to Him without words for no reason other than to be sculpted and chiseled by Him until, moment by moment, I begin to look more like Him. I have no agenda except to rest in His embrace, to let Him do the grace-work in me while I savor His nearness. Out of my wordlessness, words come. But they are words whose origins are in Him. He floods my silence with His living voice.

How To


How do we approach prayer without words? Let me make some suggestions, but find your own way. Don't take this on as a new rule to follow or a new job to do. Approach it as adding a new dimension to your private worship. Learning how to listen in prayer will be freeing and refreshing to you.

1. Picturing Prayer

The Bible is a visual book. God has authored it to be a book of pictures because He created our minds to be visually oriented. Our minds turn every idea into a mental picture of some sort.

As I describe visual praying to you, let me first emphasize that this is nothing like New Age religions call “visualizing.” In that false teaching, a person is instructed to visualize something in order to create a reality. The error is that visualizing something will create the power to bring it to pass. This is not what I am talking about.





To pray visually, allow your mind to “see” the reality that God has already described to us—the reality of His presence in you and with you. You are not trying to create a reality, but instead you are entering into the experience of that which is already so. A prime component of listening or contemplative prayer is to be fully aware the presence of Christ and to be completely in the moment. Close your eyes and let your mind see Him. Maybe you see Him in the room with you. Maybe you see yourself in the heavenly realms with Him. Either is true and solidly real.

In the inner sanctuary of your own soul, a phrase used by Thomas E. Kelley, take a position of worship. Some days you may be on your face before Him; others you might dance in delight; maybe you kneel before Him and you reach out and take hold of the hem of His garment, letting His life flow into you.

This visual praying will help you come wordlessly to Him, letting Him supply the words.

2. Conversation

As you worship Him, do you see that He does not stay disconnected and aloof from your worship, but instead reaches out to you and invites you to seek His face? Conversation begins—the give and take of two hearts. Let Him tell you how extravagantly He loves you and how He delights in you. Respond to Him in that moment, not out of your doctrinal stance, but from the honest depths of your being. You are not imagining a scene, you are experiencing His presence.

3. The Word

In listening prayer, the Scripture has a crucial role. Let the Spirit of the living and present Word speak His words to you. As you read the Scripture during contemplative prayer, don’t make an effort to analyze it or parse it. Ask Him to speak it to you in a new and living way. Focus on Him and His voice.



4. A Focused Heart

Many who have learned and practiced listening prayer suggest that you settle on a phrase that calls your heart and mind back when other thoughts intrude. When you find your mind wandering, as you will in the beginning especially, don't waste time condemning yourself. Just speak the phrase that says a heart-full and you'll soon see that it immediately centers your thoughts on Him. My phrase is "Only You." Some days I might say the phrase many, many times; other days I may not use it all.

5. Worship with Abandon

Do you know what I love the most about discovering the inner sanctuary of my own soul? I can worship with abandon! You can dance or reach out to Him or fall on your face before Him.



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