

CONTENTS

Between Friends	9
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Part I:

Realize the Way He Speaks

1. If You're Listening	17
2. Inside Information	37
3. What Do You Want?	51
4. What's Better Than a Burning Bush?	63

Part 2:

Recognize the Sound of His Voice

5. He Is Persistent	77
6. He Communicates Personally	91
7. He Brings Peace	105
8. He Will Challenge You	117
9. He Exudes Truth	127
10. He Speaks with Authority	143

Part 3:

Remember What He Wants to Accomplish

11. The Better to Know Him	157
12. Sounds Like a Plan	167
13. Yes, Lord	181
14. Greater Expectations	197

Sources of Quotes	213
Acknowledgments	215
About the Author	217

IF YOU'RE LISTENING

Chapter One

*As you enter the house of God, keep your
ears open and your mouth shut. . . .
After all, God is in heaven, and you are
here on earth. So let your words be few.*

Ecclesiastes 5:1-2 NLT

It started out as a simple lunch with an old friend. That's all it was intended to be. I sat across from Jada, a faithful confidante I'd known since childhood, hashing out every detail of an issue that was weighing heavily on my mind. She's a wise woman, always has been—a very insightful person. So I knew she could give me some good counsel.

We'd managed to clear an hour from our equally crowded calendars one weekday afternoon to visit. I suggested we meet at a nearby restaurant, not so much to dig in as to dig deep. As soon as we had been seated, I immediately began sharing some of the main points of my problem. Before we even sat down at the table, and then through the server introductions, the water glass refills, the entrée deliveries, and the dessert offerings, I barely came up for air, rambling incessantly about every detail and nuance of the situation.

My sweet friend nodded her head sympathetically between bites of salad and sips of iced tea. The occasional “mm-hmm” suggested that she was

still following my long, clackety train of thought. Then, as the dishes were being cleared away and the check delivered, I leaned back in my seat and finally took a breath. I saw her glance down at her watch and tug a bit at her purse.

“So . . . what do you think I should do?” I asked, a bit impatient with her hesitating response.

“Priscilla,” she answered, very kindly, gently, “I did have some things to say to you, but you never stopped talking long enough to listen.”

Oh.

Nothing like those faithful “wounds of a friend” (Proverbs 27:6) to smack you square in the face with the truth. In love.

I drove home that afternoon a bit disappointed. I hadn’t gotten the clarity I’d hoped for. Jada hadn’t said much. But reflecting on her response to my hour-long rant, the Holy Spirit *did* say something. With piercing conviction. Hadn’t I been approaching Him the same way? Talking, talking, talking, talking—praying (feels better calling it that). But mostly just talking, repeating myself, analyzing, rationalizing. Like Jada, God was reminding me, “*I do have some things to say to you, Priscilla, but you never stop talking long enough to listen.*”

And with that, I’d been schooled. I’d gotten perhaps my most profound lesson to date on hearing the voice of God, and it hit me squarely in the heart.

If I wanted to hear, I had to listen.

Creating time, space, and opportunity to hear God is paramount for those of us who desire to sense His Spirit’s conviction, to receive His detailed guidance, and to discern His intimate leading. Before I could even begin to explore further instruction concerning how God speaks—or even *why* He speaks—I first had to ask myself whether or not I wanted to hear Him enough to stop doing all the talking so that I might listen.

It all starts here: if we want to be able to sense His direction, we must slow down, quiet our hearts, and listen for the way His Spirit communicates.

The more I’ve continued to contemplate the implications of this concept, the more I’ve realized that it isn’t just specific to my prayer life. Rather, it provides the basis for hearing from God at all times, whether I’m on my

knees in prayer or on my feet hurrying through the nuances of my daily demands.

When reading His Word, it means approaching it with an open mind and heart that's not already bogged down with my own opinions and ideas of what the text is saying. It means coming with time to meditate and to mull over its personal application.

In the regular rhythms of life, it means being willing to wait and watch, to sense where God is moving before I hurry to make a decision. It means not having all the answers I'd like to have but not becoming frazzled by that, staying quiet and patient as He gives me what I do need to know, understanding that this "empty space"—this listening posture that makes me so jumpy and uncomfortable—is exactly the void He can fill with His divine wisdom and direction. It means being attentive to the undercurrent of His ongoing activity beneath the surface of my everyday happenings.

The lesson was becoming more and more clear: creating and allowing margin to hear God is fundamental to discerning His voice. Because in that space, we seek Him, lean into Him, and acknowledge Him in a way we might not otherwise be able to. In doing so, we get the chance to really know who we're dealing with. If we're always impatient, filling in the silent margins during prayer, in our decision making, and in every other aspect of life, we leave little space for God's powerful direction to resonate in our already crowded schedules and hearts.

So as you begin your journey through the pages of this book, and before we explore the details of how you can discern God's leading, I want you to ponder this fundamental issue of *listening*, upon which hearing God ultimately hinges. What's on your list of questions for God right now?

If we're always impatient, we leave little space for God's direction to resonate in our already crowded schedules.

SHOULD I

- marry this person?
- accept this position?
- look into this opportunity?
- participate in this activity?
- consent to this agreement?
- allow this outcome?
- stop this process?

Job questions . . . cars . . . raising children . . . major purchases . . . medical decisions . . . even whose-family-to-disappoint-by-not-coming-for-Christmas issues. Some of these are temporary; some potentially life-changing. Some involve choices between good and better; others between bad and worse. But they all represent problems to handle, decisions to make. Questions.

This list could go on, couldn't it? Our lives are an ever-changing catalog of intricately woven personal inquiries that we each need divine direction to navigate accurately. So while you're thinking of your list of questions, add one to it, would ya? Those others were for God; this one is for you . . .

Have you sincerely taken time to hear, to see, to wait, to watch—to allow for the margins that would give God an opportunity to offer you that which you claim to desire so earnestly? Or have you already filled in every conceivable space with your own opinions, ideas, decisions, and actions—space that God might otherwise fill with His perfectly timed and precisioned and personal insight?

The answer to this one critical question is really where the journey of hearing God begins.

Take into your heart all My words which
I will speak to you and listen closely.
Ezekiel 3:10

Listen Up

I suspect that at least some of the reason you laid eyes on this book in the first place is because you want to get to the bottom of this often hard-to-understand concept of discerning God's voice—maybe for your general, spiritual growth, but maybe also for specific, personal reasons. You need to know some things from God in relation to an important dilemma or decision in your life, and you want to find out how to hear Him more clearly so you can understand what to do.

If what you're grappling with was simply a matter of right and wrong, it might not be so hard to deal with. I pray you already believe in the truth of Scripture and all the directives that are clearly outlined in it, so the validity of these "black and white" commands from God aren't really at issue here (even if you're not always inclined to follow them). What's on your question plate right now is most likely an "either/or" kind of thing.

And if forced to pick an answer right this minute, you could make just as good an argument for one option as the other. Depends on the time of day. The mood you're in. The kind of meal you just ate.

Sure, you do have the Bible to consult for guidance, but you know you can't just open it at random, taking verses out of context simply to affirm your own choices. *You genuinely want to hear from God.* You want to know whether the recent circumstances you've noticed around you are more than mere coincidence, or whether the comments you heard someone make to you might truly be a signal of God's will and direction. You want to make sure that this conviction you're feeling is not just of your own creating.

And while there are many reasons why this happens—some because of our own impatience, some because of unconfessed sin in our lives clogging the connection, some because we don't know what we're even looking for when it comes to sensing the Spirit's prompting, and some because of God's

One of the most common reasons why we don't hear from God is perhaps the most obvious: We're not listening.

sovereign decision to make us wait a little longer than we'd like (keep reading, we'll get to all these things)—one of the most common reasons why we don't hear from God is perhaps the most obvious. And it's the one I want you to consider right here at the very beginning of our journey together. Could it be that . . .

We're not listening?

I believe the most practical way we can begin to discipline ourselves in this area is in our prayer lives. This has been one of the most stunning revelations I've had in my journey with God on the matter of discerning His voice. So simple, yet profound. I've learned it from folks whose walk with the Lord I greatly admire.

When I see men and women whose relationship with God is particularly inspiring, I'm not the least bit afraid to walk right up and ask them what they attribute it to. And without fail, each person I ask—no matter who it is—ultimately tells me the same thing: "I deliberately carve out time in my prayer life to be still and listen for God's voice."

They spend time with Him in prayer, listening in silence for Him to speak. For while God does speak in other venues of life beside the quiet, secret place of prayer, these people suggest that accurately discerning His voice starts here. Divine conversations begin in this place and then blossom from the richness of its soil throughout the rest of their busy day.

Once I ponder the prayer life of these believers, I realize why my own prayers have so often been weak and powerless. I begin to understand why there's a disconnect between the power I want in my prayer life and what I'm experiencing. I can finally put my finger on why I don't always seem to make out what God is saying to me or how He's directing me in a particular situation.

Simple. I haven't been listening.

And if the most godly people I know—people who I'm confident hear from Him on a regular, ongoing basis—if these people are the ones who spend the most time listening quietly for His voice, then I want to be that kind of person too. One who listens to God.

How about you?

Then that's where we begin.

Deliberately listening for God's voice seems to be a lost art these days. Well, let's be honest, listening *period* is a lost art. We rarely listen to each other, much less the unseen God. Instead we've inserted a lot of noise and activity—some of it well-meaning, even religious, but nonetheless fast-paced. In fact, we think God probably wouldn't be pleased with us unless we were keeping up this level of forward progress. We think all of our bustle and busyness in the pursuit of Christian living somehow makes Him *more* likely to speak to us once He recognizes how hard we're willing to work for Him.

From that perspective, stopping to listen to Him in order to make room for His guidance sounds bland and ordinary. Too easy. Uneventful. A waste of time for people who can get as much done as we can.

Yet all this commotion of ours, far from helping us, only keeps us cloudier and more overcommitted, less able to hear from God. By letting a thousand interruptions barge in, demanding to be accommodated, we only succeed in setting ourselves up for compromise and

confusion. The Enemy wins a victory every time we let our jam-packed schedules invade the sanctuary of our quiet time with God. And when we allow it to happen, we set a precedent that the rest of our lives seem to end up following.

See if this sounds familiar . . .

In the stillness of the morning, I begin my quiet time—to those moments I purposely set aside for Bible reading, prayer, meditation, *listening*—and I lean my elbows on heaven's windowsill, eager to commune with the Lord.

But first, to satisfy my curiosity, I check to see if I've gotten any new e-mails since last night.

When I finally come back, I'm a little more distracted, a little less

In one case I was too busy to come to God at all. In the other I was too busy (even while I was with Him) for Him to come to me.

focused and clearheaded. Suddenly the phone rings. Caller ID beckons my eyes, and I feel compelled to pick up the receiver. The anticipation is too much. I answer it.

Oh, never mind, I'll just have my quiet time before I go to bed tonight.

Ten p.m. The kids are finally in bed, dinner dishes washed, and the bills finally paid online. I've given preference to everything else over my quiet time all day long, one thing after another. Now I'm worn out and exhausted. I plop myself under the covers, my Bible on my lap. Within five minutes I'm asleep. My good intentions go out with my night light.

The Enemy smirks.

So the next morning, I'm at it again, intent on not letting another day start without spending time with God. What happened to me yesterday *will not* happen to me again. I wake up early enough, grab a cup of tea, and get going. I spend thirty whole minutes—fifteen minutes scouring a few chapters of the Bible, and another fifteen going through the list of prayer needs I keep written in my notebook. When the time is over, I can't believe how fast it's gone. I pop up and get on with my day. I feel proud not having let the opportunity pass me by again.

But have I really done a better job than the day before? Sure, spending time with Him in some way is better than none at all. But neither opportunity allowed margin for God to fill. In one case I was too busy to come to God at all. In the other I was too busy (even while I was with Him) for Him to come to me. In neither instance did I hear from God, sense His presence, or make room for His Spirit's conviction.

Reading a verse, saying a prayer, or singing a song may help you feel better about checking "quiet time" off your to-do list, but these alone won't help you get what you're after—knowing Him more intimately, uniting with His heart, and receiving His direction for your life.

Have we become so addicted to busyness—not merely in our daily lives but while we're actually immersed in our daily devotions—that we've trained ourselves *not to hear Him*?

Carving out time in prayer to purposefully listen for God's voice—His voice and nothing else—retrains us so we can hear the Spirit's whisper and gain the ability to hear Him clearly. Stopping to listen to Him enables us

to become familiar with what a sense of God's presence feels like, while enlarging our understanding of His plans for us, seeing them emerge into the light.

This doesn't mean that during our devotional times we're not allowed to open our mouths and share our hearts with God in prayer. On the contrary, we're not only *allowed* to do this but we've been *instructed* to speak up and let our "requests be made known to God" (Philippians 4:6). If we want to hear Him speak, however, we must also learn to pray without words. To listen for His voice. To seek the simplicity of stillness with Him rather than consuming all the time and space ourselves. We can't allow what *we're* saying to keep us from listening to what *He* wants to say.

Not if we want to hear the voice of God.

That's why right here in the first chapter of the book, I want us to go ahead and get very practical on this fundamental issue. Again, I believe it will set the precedent for how this plays out in the other dimensions of our walk with God. Over the years I've often heard believers say what I'm saying to you now—that we must "listen" for God if we want to hear Him speak to us. But for some reason it never occurred to me that this was a concrete discipline I could apply in any sort of practical, real-world kind of way. I didn't realize that listening wasn't just some passive, "spiritual" assignment that was part of my progressive sanctification or something.

Listening to God is a purposeful activity that we are supposed to start doing. It is the investment of time we must make in order to yield the spiritual dividends of wisdom we so desperately need. The Bible tells us to "incline" our ears toward Him (Isaiah 55:3), to "draw near to listen" (Ecclesiastes 5:1). Fifteen times in the New Testament, the Lord punctuates His point with these words: "Anyone who has ears must listen . . ." (Revelation 2:29 NLT, is one example).

So expect this discipline to require some work. If you want to become an active listener, you need to learn the art of listening as I myself am seeking to. And if you're a person like me who enjoys being up and going and doing, this can prove to be a very difficult challenge. Be ready for the fact that it takes discipline and time and probably won't happen during commercial breaks or while monitoring your friends' Twitter updates.

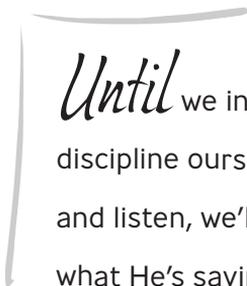
Now don't get me wrong. I'm as captivated by modern advances as the next gal. I'm typing right now on my Apple computer while checking an incoming message on my iPhone. I'm the first to admit that I'm grateful for these gadgets and am as dazzled by them as all of us tend to be. Nothing wrong with any of these, as long as they're not controlling us.

But each "improvement" can plunge us deeper into the abyss of busyness, squelching God's voice to a distant echo. Our prayers become mindless and hurried, scattered and incoherent. All talk. All me. All on my own time frame and agenda.

That's just not how listening happens. Really listening in prayer requires getting yourself on a whole other wavelength. You must control your body's urge to get up and move around. You must fight to keep your mind from wandering, from letting stray thoughts dictate what you choose to dwell on. You must keep your eyes from scanning the room and noticing things you need to take care of—things you'd like to get busy accomplishing right now while you're thinking of it!

Listening can be a real endeavor when you actually try doing it. But, oh, once you start to hear Him, you'll be anxious to do it again and again.

While I'm still growing and fighting my tendency toward busyness, I now look forward to every opportunity to get alone with God, Bible open, pen out, ready to concentrate. When you know He's going to speak, listening for Him ceases to be a chore and becomes a cherished delight. Exhilarating. Exciting. Hearing the voice of the Almighty has changed my humdrum Christian experience from a discipline into a passion. I no longer study the Bible merely as an instructional and theological tool (though it certainly is), but also as God's love letter to me. I eagerly look into its pages as I sit quietly before Him and listen for His voice. Sure, I don't hear a clear, direct answer to my most pressing questions every time I'm quiet



Until we intentionally discipline ourselves to be still and listen, we'll miss most of what He's saying.

before Him. There are many times when I leave with nothing more than an awareness of God's nearness and His care. But that in itself is often the answer I didn't even know I needed.

I'm in no way implying that it's impossible to hear God speak amid the regular rhythms of everyday life. On the contrary, we can, and He does. We can listen while we're exercising, clipping coupons, washing dishes, sitting in traffic, taking a shower, and doing all sorts of mundane tasks. We can be aware of His handiwork moving in natural things, making them supernatural. But until we intentionally discipline ourselves to be still and listen, to acquaint ourselves with His voice and His stirrings in our private, intimate moments with Him, we'll never hear Him consistently anywhere. We'll miss most of what He's saying.

I close my eyes to shut out visual stimuli. . . . I close my ears by dealing authoritatively with distractions which threaten my ability to tune into God. . . . I close a series of shutters on the surface level of my life, thus holding at bay hindrances to hearing the still, small voice of God, and I release a trigger that gives deeper, inner, hidden parts of myself permission to spark to life.

—Joyce Huggett

Listening in Prayer

College algebra was the worst class I've ever taken. Not only because God didn't connect the math wires in my brain, but also because my professor was a poor teacher.

It was my first year at the university, and I signed up for this core curriculum class right off the bat. Wanted to get it out of the way. I can't tell you much about my professor—what he looked like or what his name was—because honestly, I never really saw him that much. He was always in front of the class teaching, but never with any enthusiasm or eagerness. In fact, every single Monday, Wednesday, and Friday at 1:30 p.m., he'd take his position in front of the three hundred students filling the auditorium. With his back turned squarely to us, he'd face the blackboard and start teaching.

For one full hour, he talked directly into the blackboard while standing right in front of whatever he was writing down. We couldn't see anything. Could barely even make out what he was saying.

Naturally, the attention span of most of the students waned very quickly during every class period. Some of us would try to stay attentive, but we found it much more intriguing to pay closer attention to one another. And while on occasion we might be able to regurgitate what the professor was saying at any given moment, we weren't really engaged in the class. Sure, we could hear his voice, but we weren't *really* listening.

It's called passive listening. The accidental, unintentional kind. Surely you've been engaged in conversation with another person, and though you're looking into her face, though you're hearing every syllable her lips are forming, you're not really listening. It's all a bunch of words that would probably mean something if you were paying attention, but you're not really even trying to digest what she's saying.

That's us. Most of the time.

Passive listeners.

But the listening that God requires is active, intentional, and aggressive. "But if you look carefully into the perfect law that sets you free, and if you do what it says and don't forget what you heard, then God will bless you for doing it" (James 1:25 NLT).

That's why unrushed times with God are essential to hearing His voice and discerning His will. There's no formula for doing this, no absolute, sure-fire steps to follow, no lists to check off. Your relationship with the Lord is as personal as you are, and He intends to deal with you as an individual.

Yet I've found that three specific activities stand out among those believers who engage in sincere fellowship with God, enabling them to receive ongoing direction from Him. If you'll try incorporating these elements into your time with Him—in whatever way He leads you to approach them—you'll create an atmosphere more conducive to listening, a laboratory for learning how to recognize His voice and respond in obedience—*worship*, *prayerful listening*, and *meditation*.

Worship

Anytime God is speaking—anyplace we expect to hear His voice—worship cannot be very far away. Worship rolls out the red carpet for God's presence to invade a space. I used to think *worship* was just a word that applied to the corporate gathering together of God's people, but I began to learn from mentors that worship with others is only an overflow of our personal experience. They taught me to choose whatever genre of worship music that exalted God and caused me to do the same, and let it fill the room as a prelude to my time with God. So this became my habit, meeting with Him against the backdrop of praise music, allowing the lyrics to guide me into my worship of Him—differently than I worshiped Him yesterday, differently than I'll worship Him tomorrow.

As the songs highlight an attribute of His character, I concentrate on how I've seen it revealed in my own life, and I ascribe praise to Him for it. The point is not for me to sing (although this is a beautiful offering that pleases the Lord). The purpose is to be drawn into fellowship with Him through the music.

I saw this demonstrated in a church service once. After each song during the praise and worship time at the beginning of service, the leader, singers, and musicians just stopped and prayerfully allowed a few moments of silence. Within this interlude the congregants had time to really “hear” what they'd just sung and spend time reacting personally to how the Lord might want to use it to draw them to Himself and inspire them to offer worship to Him. It was a lovely, beautiful demonstration of how each person could do the same individually.

During this part of my personal quiet time, even if only for a few minutes, I'll often feel led to get down on my knees, or perhaps lie prostrate on the floor in a position of absolute surrender and humility before Him. As the music plays, the awareness of His presence both overwhelms and encourages me. I'm not doing much, just soaking in His presence that's infiltrating the space I've created for Him and invited Him to invade. I'm waiting while I'm worshipping. I've confessed my utter dependence on His grace and empowerment. I've acknowledged who He is—the only One worthy of my trust, the only One who can always be counted on to speak truth into my life.

Now I'm listening.

Really listening.

Prayerful Listening

My prayer time used to be a one-way conversation—all talk, all the time. I felt like every word was just hitting the ceiling and bouncing back. I felt no closer to God and certainly did not sense that any conversation had taken place between the two of us.

That's when I spotted the apostle Paul's comments about his prayer life, and its message seemed to leap off the page and jump directly into my hungry heart. He wrote about praying with his mind as well as with his spirit (see 1 Corinthians 14:15). And while his comments were directly related to the operation of spiritual gifts within the Corinthian church, there's something very instructive for us in his statement. It points toward two dimensions that should encompass our prayer lives. My own prayers used to be pretty much limited to the mental part—the “mind” portion of Paul's equation—which I'm now certain kept me from experiencing the fullness of what prayer should be. I always had my list of requests, confessions, concerns, thanksgiving, and comments that I made to the Lord. But once I'd exhausted everything that was on my mind, my prayer time was over. Paul's own example encouraged me to more fully engage God's Spirit within me while in prayer.

So I've sought to no longer neglect that element to my prayer life now, and it has begun to make all of the difference. Once I'm finished bringing my prepackaged matters to God's attention, instead of ending things right there—as though I've dutifully delivered my report to Him and can now go on about my business as usual—I don't. I resist the urge to jump to my feet just because “I'm done.” Sure, *I* might be done, but . . . what if God's not? *I've* gotten a chance to talk—to share with Him what is on my mind. Why should I not at least allow Him the same courtesy? So I stop allowing what my mind is aware of to control the prayer time. I pray with my “spirit.”

Rather than telling God things I already know, I invite Him to tell me things only *He* knows, things He wants to share with me by His Spirit. I allow the Holy Spirit to bring people and situations to mind that I wouldn't

normally think of. Then I pray for them and ask how I might be useful in ministering to these individuals personally, since that is quite possibly why He's telling me about them in the first place.

I ask Him to "search me . . . and know my heart" (Psalm 139:23), and when I sense conviction concerning a sin I didn't even realize I was committing (which I often do), I offer it to Him in prayer, seeking forgiveness and soaking it deeply in His grace.

Perhaps He brings to mind a particular passage of Scripture, so I turn there in my Bible and start to meditate on its principles, assuming the Spirit has led me here for a reason.

Who knows what He might say to me next if all I'm doing is listening? He might even give me an important indicator of His will concerning a specific matter I'd mentioned to Him when I first sat down. "The thoughts of God no one knows except the Spirit of God" (1 Corinthians 2:11). And if I'm ever to know what His thoughts are, they won't come from my own self, my own words, my own talking. Only from listening. Listening in prayer. This is God's turn to talk, and very frequently—when given the chance—He'll do just that.

Meditation

Whenever I touch on or talk about meditation, I invariably hear from folks who think I'm trailing off into some sort of spooky mysticism, like I'm getting a little weird on them. And while I'm certainly aware of the Zen-like methods used by many in our culture to achieve a more relaxed, enlightened state of being, I'm not willing to let some pagan ritual steal a piece of my spiritual arsenal simply because it's subject to misuse.

The bottom line is this: Scripture encourages believers to meditate on God and His Word. Not to empty our minds for the purpose of focusing on "nothingness" as pagan meditation aims for, but to fill them with intentional thoughts of Him and His Word (Joshua 1:8; Psalms 1:2; 119:15, 97).

Meditation is the discipline of pondering. It's what every single one of us who has ever been in love has done. We sit and think about that person—going over every facial expression, every word he last spoke to us, every little thing we most cherish about him. This, in its simplest, most sanctified

form, is what God desires. He is to be the love interest we are to focus on when we meditate (in the Christian sense of the word). It is from these times of meditation that we receive clarity as His Word becomes alive and personal by the Spirit's illumination.

As I've taken this biblical directive more seriously, I've discovered I do not need to wait for Sunday to encounter Him in deep, meaningful ways. Some of my most precious moments with Him—the ones that end up in my journal for safekeeping—happen in my secret place, sitting silently all alone in His presence, sometimes with only a single verse of Scripture, perhaps only a single word or phrase, being shared back and forth between His Spirit and mine.

I slowly and deliberately allow His words to wash over me. When I read the Scriptures, I place my own name or a personal pronoun into the verse, letting it speak directly to me. If I'm reading and meditating on a particular Bible story or event, I imagine myself in the scene. For example, if I'm reading the story of the woman caught in a scandalous web of adultery by the judgmental and conniving Pharisees (John 8), I put myself in her shoes—humiliated, ashamed, guilty, but then offered grace by Jesus before all of my accusers. Becoming part of the story in this way causes me to “experience” the passage instead of just reading about it. And then, very often, it happens—a verse will open up to me. The Spirit will uncover my eyes so I can really see its truth and its application for me in the current happenings of my life. It's a thrilling moment. Sweet. Powerful. Intimate. Individual. And . . . it's worth waiting for.

At its core, meditation is about getting to know God, because the discipline of discerning His voice really boils down to one very simple yet poignant principle: The more you *know* God, the more clearly you can *hear* God. While I meditate on a passage, I'll ask myself:

- What does this verse reveal to me about Him?
- What spiritual principle does it teach?
- Am I living in a way contrary to its truth?

- How does it relate to my present circumstances?
- How should I respond to what I'm contemplating?

Forcing myself not to fill in the silence with activity, I listen for His voice to direct me. I deal authoritatively with distraction by making a list of the stray thoughts, errands, or issues that keep presenting themselves so that I feel like I've dealt with them and can get back to the business at hand. As the Spirit brings thoughts, answers, convictions, concerns, or solutions to my mind, I record them in my journal. I consider God's goodness to me, or just the goodness of God Himself. He speaks to me in ways I would never be open to considering—ways I may never experience if I only met with Him on my way between appointments or the occasional Bible study. To hear Him, I must listen. Think. Concentrate on Him. Meditate.

First, it is "me and Him." I come to prayer conscious of myself, my need, my desires. I pour these out to God. Second, prayer becomes "Him and me." Gradually I become more conscious of the presence of God than of myself. Then it is only "Him." God's presence arrests me, captivates me, warms me, works on me.

—Stephen Verney

Voice of the Shepherd

In sharing with you the details of my typical prayer time, my hope is not that you'll copy my pattern. My only goal in describing how He speaks to me in private is to motivate you to desire personal time with Him yourself. Oh, and one more thing—to make sure you know that there is never any reason to give up hope of hearing His voice again. If you don't think He's interested in giving you direction about your specific needs and questions, be encouraged. He is waiting for you to draw near to Him so He can draw near to you.

To speak to you.

Jesus, speaking to His disciples in John 10:27, assured them—and us—of this promise: "My sheep hear My voice." No ifs. No buts. No exceptions.

No escape clauses. If you're His child—if you're one of His sheep—the certainty of God speaking to you is as sure as the chair you're sitting in.

Now the relationship between sheep and shepherd is one that's foreign to most of us, but not to Jesus' original audience. They were well aware that it was routine for many flocks of sheep to be brought together to stay the night in a common sheepfold. In the morning each shepherd would return, calling his sheep to come away with him and go out to the fields for grazing. The sheep in the fold would hear many other shepherds' voices throughout those early hours of the day, but they were trained only to respond to the voice of *their* shepherd—their *true* shepherd.

When they heard that singular, undeniable voice, it didn't matter if they were light or dark sheep. Young or old. Wide or slender. High end or budget rack. All that mattered was that they were *his* sheep. *All that mattered was who they belonged to.*

So let me interject some questions to you at this point: Who do you belong to? Is Jesus Christ your true Shepherd? Have you received Him as your Lord and Savior? Do you belong to Him?

I ask because the Bible makes plain that those who have not bowed their knee to Jesus—accepting His sacrifice on the cross for our sins and committing our lives to Him, thus receiving God's Spirit—should not expect to hear the voice of the one true God in any ongoing way. All the listening in the world cannot tune the ears of the flesh to hear the holy. "People who aren't spiritual can't receive these truths from God's Spirit. It all sounds foolish to them and they can't understand it, for only those who are spiritual can understand what the Spirit means" (1 Corinthians 2:14 NLT). The person who doesn't trust Christ as Savior is missing the one essential, necessary ingredient for interacting and communicating with Him.

However, if you have placed your faith in Jesus Christ, yet you're discouraged right now because you're struggling to discern His voice, please don't doubt your salvation. That's just what the Enemy wants you to do—belittle the faithful work of God and settle for limits in your relationship with Christ.

Remember, learning to hear God's voice is a process, a learning experience,

a discipline that involves active elements like prayer, meditation, worship, and *listening*. Just as any relationship grows stronger and more intimate as you spend more time getting to know a person, so your relationship with God—your ability to discern His voice and to pick it out of the crowd—will grow keener and more developed as you spend more time with Him. Even if you've been a believer for many years, even though you may be trying as hard as humanly possible to wait for Him and patiently persevere, renew yourself to starting afresh. If you've begun to doubt that He cares enough to communicate with you anymore, if you don't see how He could still love you after all you've done, if you think you've made too big of a mess for any word of His to fix or restore the damage, open your heart to Him again today. Sit with Him. Be still before Him. Don't despair.

Matthew 6:6 promises that “your Father who sees what is done in secret”—the praying, listening, and seeking—“will reward you” with His presence, His guidance, and the gripping sound of His voice. This is a priority to Him, just as it should be to us. So make time to spend with Him. He is waiting to speak to you—to anyone who truly wants to hear Him, anyone who calls out to Him.

Anyone who listens.

Chapter Challenges

- Write down the current issues in your life that you need to discern God's will regarding. As you go through this book, use your list as a reference.
- Scale back on what you will “do” during your devotional time so you can leave room to “be” with God.
- Deal authoritatively with distractions so you can concentrate on the task of listening. When something comes to mind, write it down and then set it aside.
- Allow for and accept “God margins” in all areas of your life. Relax instead of trying to fill in every space with your own ideas, decisions, and actions.