



## Hearing God in Your Creativity

(Excerpts from Finding Divine Inspiration, Chapter 6 “Developing a Listening Lifestyle”)

[By J. Scott McElroy](#)

“I would rather a thousand times be five minutes at the feet of Christ than listen a lifetime to all the wise men in the world.”

—D.L. Moody

### A Path to Hearing God

If you want to hear from God, get truly honest with Him. Then trust Him to do whatever He wants.

For years I floundered in my morning devotions. The excuses were easy to come by: I couldn't get up to do them because I'm not a morning person; my mind would always wander; I didn't seem to get much out of them; I didn't really know how to study the Bible. I still struggle with these things, but now my devotions are almost always fruitful. This change came because of a number of reasons, the first being that I quit messing around with my relationship with the Father. More than twenty years of fluctuating levels of commitment to and concentration on my faith had accumulated into a load of spiritual misconceptions and had created callousness. I thought I knew how to live a Christian life, but when the shattering crisis of separation and divorce blindsided me, I got desperate.

And that's when my faith became real. The crisis effectively nuked all my old presumptions about life and faith, so much so that I often felt I had two choices: death or His touch. In my desperate honesty, He did meet me, and I found He had been waiting for a long time. All the questions about faith that had gone unanswered because of my misconception that being a “good Christian” meant just accepting things, were laid on the table. I also put myself in a position to let God search through my false assumptions, spiritual pride, spiritual laziness, and carnal thinking.

I started praying only honest prayers. Not “safe” stuff, but expressing real thoughts and feelings and asking for dangerous things—things that I really needed. I tried to really depend on His provision instead of taking care of everything myself and leaving only the “impossible” things to Him. I thought, “If God is real and He cares about my life, then let's do it!” I decided to open myself up and ask Him to work, without setting up all my contingency plans in case He didn't come through. By the way, contingency plans are one of the reasons why “it's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God” (Matt. 19:24). Money can buy you more options. You may think you

don't need to depend on God because you have other ways to accomplish things. Jesus' heart was close to the poor because they knew they needed His help! We need to learn this attitude in order to develop a listening lifestyle.

Another thing I did was to look for my Father to use the Bible to speak to me. I got wild and started to flip at random on occasion, praying for the Holy Spirit to guide. I started to ask the Holy Spirit to bring understanding before I read or during reading. I asked for Him to bring illumination, even revelation, when I hit a difficult or troubling passage. And He did! "But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and remind you of everything I have said to you"(John 14:26). Someone once said the Bible is the only book that comes with its own teacher.

### **The Joy of Journaling**

As my spiritual life was being reformed, I started to journal in a new and honest way. I write down bits and pieces of what I think God might be saying to me: verses of Scripture, lines from devotions, encouragement or thoughts from other people, even prophetic or inspired words—and the deeper cries of my heart—angry questions for God, the anguish of struggles, the wonder of answered prayers. Everything goes in my journal; it doesn't need to make sense or be a "thus sayeth the Lord." Time and perspective make it fairly easy to discern what is real and what is nonsense. "If I can write things out I can see them, and they are no longer trapped within my own subjectivity."<sup>7</sup>

This is not a journal for anyone else's eyes, and I put the words Private Journal on the outside. It seems juvenile, but it's effective. I don't leave my journal lying around to tempt the curious. I pray for the Father to protect it from prying eyes.

Even though it is sometimes inconvenient to take such precautions, it is nothing compared to the hundreds of joys God has given in the reading of the entries. This is treasure, and it has helped my life make sense in the most desperate of times. To look back on an entry and see the work of the Lord in my thoughts or life—even though I may not have recognized it at the time—is an incredible blessing. I see the threads of His leading and His voice winding through the months and the years. Madeleine L'Engle said: "I am still in the process of growing up, but I will make no progress if I lose any of myself along the way."<sup>8</sup>

Prayers of desperation that have been answered build my faith; changed situations of people I've prayed for over the years amaze me. Deep revelation that God deposited in times of seeking inspire me more later than at the time. This journal is the history of a glorious relationship, a never-ending love, and a constant faithfulness, and it is also a uniquely fulfilling form of creative collaboration! I express myself to God; He expresses Himself to me; we create a living, growing relationship. What a blessing to experience creativity in such a context!

Julia Cameron, in *The Artist's Way*, talks about the importance of journaling for the creative person. She has her students write three "morning pages" every day as a way of getting past the internal "censor" that constantly nags artists, telling us "we can't" or "we aren't," or whatever. She suggests that the

pages can be about anything or nothing, but they are a way to clear the mind so we can get on with the business of creativity. “The morning pages will teach you to stop judging and just let yourself write.”<sup>9</sup>

It’s good to remember that your prayer journal can look like anything you want it to. Not having to judge it and instead just letting yourself write and express is so freeing spiritually, mentally, emotionally, and creatively. This makes it completely different from one of those journals from some pious historical figure that you hear quoted, or the kind that you had to keep for English class in high school. This is between you and God, so you can be completely honest.

Even though there is not a “correct” way to keep a personal prayer journal, there is a structural cornerstone you can build it on that will keep it from being more than just ramblings. It’s tremendously helpful to build it on the Lord’s Prayer. This awesome gift from Jesus’ lips is often overlooked or oversimplified.

In reading Leanne Payne’s *Listening Prayer*, the importance of practicing the Lord’s Prayer became clear to me. It is an outline to guide us into confidence in seeking the Father, to know that we are coming before Him in a manner that is pleasing to Him. It’s difficult to improve on what Payne has written, so I’ll borrow from her heavily. She suggests that you divide the front of your journal into sections (which is one of reasons I always use a loose-leaf binder for my journals), each focusing on a part of the Lord’s Prayer. You then put your specific requests and thoughts into each section. So your devotional time takes on a sort of pattern that could look something like this:

- Pray through the Lord’s Prayer sections with the specific thoughts and requests you’ve written down. Add any others that come to you.
- Then, ask God to open the Word to you as you read a passage and meditate on it.
- Write anything down in your journal section (which might be after the Lord’s Prayer sections) that comes to you about what you’ve read and prayed.
- Then, ask God to speak to you about whatever is on your heart and/or whatever He wants.
- Get quiet and listen. Write down what you feel He is speaking to you.
- Test it against the Bible, or get a trusted person’s opinion on it if you need to.

This is a pattern that revolutionized my spiritual life!

Now, back to the elements of the Lord’s Prayer and their relevance to a growing spiritual life.

Essentially, if you dissect the prayer into specific parts and try to get at the spirit of each part, this is what you might find:

1. “Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.” This is “praise and thanksgiving” to the Father; acknowledging Him for what He has done and created. It is putting ourselves aside for a moment, taking a deep breath, and getting our perspective back. Psalm 46:10 says, “Be still and know

that I am God....” It’s also thanking Him for the things He has done specifically in our lives, recounting those blessings. If you were following the pattern above, you’d create a section in the front of your journal that would be titled with this part of the verse and labeled “Praise and Thanksgiving.” You might write down everything you are thankful for and make that the beginning of your prayer every day.

2. “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” In the pattern I’m talking about, you would label this section “Intercession,” and it would go in the front of your journal also. Intercession is praying for other people and their needs, asking God to work out His will in specific and general circumstances. Notice this comes before we ever mention our needs. This part of the prayer can also be a real faith-builder if you keep a list of the people you are praying for and write the answers to the prayers next to their names. Putting a date that you started praying for them and the date the answer came is also incredibly interesting. This section also will help you see more clearly how God uses us in others’ lives and how He has made us to interact with Him.

3. “Give us this day our daily bread.” This section would follow the other two at the front of your journal. This section is all about you; it’s where we take all our personal requests and just lay them before God.

Here are some gems of thought on this from Leanne Payne:

There are those, however, who think personal petition to be somehow inferior or even selfish. But the truth is that we need to pay attention to the heart’s personal needs and desires, and take care to spread them out before the Lord: Prayer in the Christian sense does not...accept the idea of a higher stage of prayer where petition is left behind. The progress that is seen in the spiritual life is from the prayer of rote to the prayer of the heart.<sup>10</sup>

As we wait for the Lord we fill this section with our personal petitions, great and small, that require ongoing prayer and even perseverance.<sup>11</sup>

It is important; therefore, to ask always for God’s mind and even his most perfect will on our petitions. To persevere with God in this way is a needful thing.<sup>12</sup>

4. “And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.” This is the part where we daily repent and forgive, a real essential to clear communication with God. It follows the previous sections in the front of your journal and may be the most important part of your daily prayer. You may think you are squared away in this area, but ask God to show you anyone you have something against, anyone whose actions toward you have been a continual source of hurt. Often, what the Father is asking us to do is just to turn our will toward forgiveness, even if the miracle and grace of forgiving a certain person is beyond us. When we let Him, He will work this out over time and through this prayer. It is His work. We’ll talk more about forgiveness later.

5. “And lead us not into temptation.” What are your temptations, really, the things that you push back in the dark places of your mind? Lust? Self-centeredness? Pride? Arrogance? Racial thoughts? Ask God to help you drag these things into the light and identify them. Then write them down in this section and pray about them daily. You may be amazed at how this “Temptations” section will help you become a

more authentic person by fostering a real honesty toward God and toward other people. Our Father already knows everything about us, and as we get honest, the realization comes that He is the only one who can lead us to real change.

6. “But deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power and the glory, forever and ever. Amen.” Recognize that we are in a battle but that God provides us with protection (Eph. 6:13-18).

Leanne Payne says, “This does not mean that we won’t suffer, but rather that good will come from the suffering; it will be redemptive in contrast to being merely remedial.”<sup>13</sup> This part of the prayer is really about crushing the lies that satan would try to bind us up with, telling us we can do nothing in the face of evil. James wrote, “Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Come near to God and He will come near to you” (James 4:7-8)

Of course, the Lord’s Prayer is not a “required” form for communicating with God. It is foundational, and recommended by Jesus, but there are many times when we need to just cry out, or to dialogue with the Father like we would with our friends—or to just be silent.

In the pattern I mentioned earlier, after I’ve prayed through the sections of the Lord’s Prayer, I might read a passage from the Bible and meditate on it, if I haven’t done that yet. Then I journal thoughts on that passage or whatever is on my heart. Finally, I stop to listen.

I was a Christian for twenty-five years before I really began giving God time to speak to me on a daily basis. I had devotional time in varying degrees over those years, but there were only a couple of times I could say that I knew God had spoken to me. Both were on walks while I was praying and thinking, in a position of listening. One time was after I saw *Forrest Gump* to review it. The film so touched me that I felt compelled to take a walk and ended up praying about my life. I felt God speak very clearly to my mind and say I needed to help my wife find out who she was. It was a profound moment. Unfortunately, I let it slip away, and two years later the marriage ended. That taught me a lesson that I’ve had to relearn many times: when God speaks, do something about what He says.

As a side note, though the disintegration of my marriage was not something I wanted and though it was profoundly painful, God brought about the book you are reading through seeking Him in that pain. And after years of waiting, He also brought me a wonderful new spouse, Danielle. I believe marriage should be honored and everything possible should be done to sustain it, and in my case, I believe that’s what I did with my first marriage. But in the end, it was out of my hands. For many years I was confused about why this happened, but now I see God’s glorious grace in the situation and how He worked this out for my good and the good of our family, just as He promises to do for all of His children.

As I said in earlier chapters, everything changed after crises in my life mercifully drove me to cling to the Father. But the biggest change in my prayer life came when I just got quiet and listened. After all the years of telling God what I needed, asking Him to bless me, and then hurrying on my way, I finally stepped into a dialogue with Him. It was a revelation to expect to hear from God. I decided I would not think it was strange if He spoke; in fact, I’d consider it normal.

One thing I always do when preparing to listen to God, besides cleaning the slate of sin and unforgiveness, is to ask Him to protect my listening time. I ask that His angels would surround me and I'd hear vertically from Him, not horizontally from myself or from the enemy. Then I get quiet.

Learning to listen is really a process. It takes personal experimentation, learning from material you read or hear, and comparing notes with other mature Christians. You'll find that some days you seem to be walking in the Spirit like a saint; other days it seems that God is not speaking at all. Some days you may hear profound prophetic words, some days just nonsense from your own issues, and some days nothing at all. That's the nature of being a flawed human vessel; we don't hear or get everything right. But a wonderful thing about faith is that everything doesn't always have to make sense.

I'll try to paraphrase a story I read of a man who decided to listen to God in his quiet time to see what He had to say. All he heard was "I love you." He thought, I could have made that up myself. For weeks all he heard was "I love you." He got very frustrated, telling God, "I know You love me! Don't You have anything else to say?" He sensed God say, "Do you? Do you really know I love you?" The man broke down in tears, and healing began to flow through issues and misconceptions he'd had about how God felt about him. The Father had to expose and deal with those issues before the man could rightly seek Him and hear His voice.

God wants us to get to know the language of His heart for us. When we lay down the preconceived notions about how He loves and feels for us, we are more open to the things He wants to say about and to us in our quiet time with Him. Often, just a few words from Him directly to us will speak volumes.

## Retreat Time

One of the most important tools for me in developing a listening lifestyle has been taking retreat times. This is simply a number of hours or days away from responsibility and distraction, spending time with God. Nearly all of the medium-to-large decisions in my life during the last decade have been made after seeking God during a retreat time.

Daily devotional time always has time constraints, so often it's hard to go deep in study or get into prolonged listening. I find that taking a Saturday morning at least a couple times a month to spend a few hours with my Father is essential to deepening our relationship. During that time, often I slow down and spend more time reading the Word, and I lay out everything that concerns me and ask Him to speak and guide. And He has countless times.

A few times a year, I try to take a whole weekend or even a week to do these things. Sometimes I'll do a fast, either from everything except liquid or maybe from certain types of foods or drinks with caffeine.

If you are in a relationship, you probably get a limited amount of daily time with your significant other. You can't wait for that date night or, if you are married, that weekend away. Simply think of your relationship with God like a romance, and retreat time becomes incredibly logical. Starve the time you

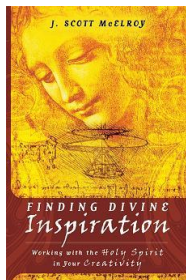
spend with the one you love and your relationship will suffer; spend special time together, and it will grow.

Like many other practices that come from a spiritual heritage, retreat time has great benefits for your creativity as well.

My friend Jeff Sparks, founder of the Heartland Film Festival, regularly takes a Friday off to retreat, pray, and seek God on things about the festival and its many ventures in the film industry. Jeff's consistent pursuit of God's guidance and will has spawned many visionary ideas and has been the foundation that's enabled the festival to positively influence the film industry for more than fifteen years. They've been able to award more prize money to filmmakers than any other festival in the United States. (Check out [Heartlandfilmfestival.org](http://Heartlandfilmfestival.org).)

Bill Gates, founder of Microsoft, was s known to take a week retreat every year he was with the company to clear his head and dream up new ideas. What he did during those retreats affected the world of technology for decades and into the future.

Your retreat times will affect your life and those around you for eternity.



(For more on the subject of hearing and collaborating with God, see *Finding Divine Inspiration: Working with the Holy Spirit in Your Creativity* (Destiny Image) available at [FindingDivineInspiration.com](http://FindingDivineInspiration.com) or wherever books are sold. )