

First, You Listen
Discover the Key to Seeking What's on God's Heart
by Lee Brase

Several years ago, God urged me to develop a deeper prayer life. I chose as my mentors the praying people of the Bible. Their words gave me a language for my own prayers. They also taught me other valuable lessons. One of them was the need to listen to God—to wait on Him—before and as I pray.

This attitude of listening was a challenge to my activist tendencies. But as I studied my mentors from Scripture. I became convinced that the habit of waiting on God was key to a transformed prayer life.

Waiting in Silence "My soul waits in silence for God only; from Him is my salvation. . . . My soul, wait in silence for God only, for my hope is from Him" (Ps. 62:1, 5, NASB). There are different ways to wait on God, but perhaps the most intense is the one described here by David: waiting in silence. When we wait in silence, we give God an opportunity to communicate His thoughts to us. David closes Psalm 62 with two thoughts that God spoke to him during his silence: "Power belongs to God" and "Lovingkindness is Thine, O Lord" (vv. 11-12, NASB). Though distressed by his circumstances and the wickedness of men, David found assurance in the character of God because he took time to listen to God.

A group of us were trying to learn to pray from God's heart rather than from our own thoughts and emotions. One person described a very difficult home environment. Our first inclination was to rush into prayer to ask God to rescue our friend from her painful circumstances. Instead, however, we spent several minutes in silence to do what David did in Ps. 131:2: "I have stilled and quieted my soul." In that silence, we asked God to prompt our hearts and minds to know what He wanted us to pray.

It was amazing how united we were in our asking. For about 15 minutes we built upon each others' prayers. When we finished praying, I turned to our friend and asked: "Did you notice what God did not lead us to pray?" Her immediate response was, "I certainly did. I think God must want to change me rather than my circumstances." We had entered the silence expecting God to use our prayers to change her circumstances, but God had something more important in mind for her. To accomplish His purpose, God changed what we asked of Him.

A Listening Attitude Asking is the easy part of prayer; knowing what to ask is the difficult part. That's why waiting on God is so critical when we intercede for one another.

How can you learn to listen to God before you rush into asking? Begin by placing yourself in a listening attitude. Think of a time when you were listening intently to

someone. You focused your attention on them, you were quiet, and you absorbed their thoughts. That's what you can do with God.

Solomon urged, "Do not be quick with your mouth, do not be hasty in your heart to utter anything before God" (Eccl. 5:2). Instead of blurting out your list of requests, enter into this silence and stillness with one question: "Lord, what do You want me to ask of You concerning the need before me?" Expect God to remind you of a Scripture passage or to put a thought in your mind. If you have already decided what you think God wants to say, you will close your heart to any other thoughts from Him, so give Him the opportunity to say anything He wants to you.

There is great safety when a group takes the time and effort to work toward finding God's will in prayer. From time to time, my wife and I do this with Mt. 18:19 in mind: "Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven." After a time of silence, we make a list of prayer requests that we agree we need to see God act on. By listening to God and coming to agreement, we enter prayer with greater faith and fervor.

Where's your focus? Another key to listening to God is to focus your attention on Him. The most powerful prayer meetings I have experienced have been the ones where we focused first on God. The longer a group stays focused on God, the more united it is in prayer. Dwelling on God causes us to become absorbed in Him and His desires. This is a form of listening because our hearts are drawn into His heart and our wills are lost in His will.

David's prayer when he was running from Saul is recorded in Psalm 63. David was in great danger, and we'd expect his prayer to begin with cries for deliverance. But David was so absorbed in focusing on God that he didn't mention his distressing situation until the end of the psalm.

One way to focus on God is to look at how He has acted in biblical history. In Acts 4, Jesus' followers faced great danger. Their lives were threatened by the same people who had condemned and crucified Jesus a few months earlier. The disciples were told "not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus" (Acts 4:18).

What would you pray in these circumstances? I can imagine asking God, "Protect us from these evil people. Give us a more acceptable method to preach Jesus. Do away with those on the council. Don't let us get caught proclaiming Your name." But listen to what the disciples prayed (vv. 24-30).

Sovereign Lord . . . you made the heaven and the earth and the sea, and everything in them. You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David: "Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the Lord and against his Anointed One." Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met

together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen. Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. Stretch out your hand to heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus.

These threatened believers probably didn't know what to ask when they first approached God. So they recalled a time in biblical history when people made threats against God. Then they traced God's response in history. The disciples saw that Jesus' suffering and death in the hands of rulers was something that God "decided beforehand should happen."

After reviewing how God's victorious plan had involved suffering, the disciples did not ask God for safety, comfort, or an easy way out. They gained the courage to ask for those things that would best advance God's kingdom during their time on earth. They made two requests: one for boldness and one for miraculous works to give their bold words credibility. God answered their prayer.

Reviewing God's work in history can be a form of listening when it is done to discern His plan and purpose. It helps us look beyond immediate needs to see how God might be using the present difficulties for eternal good.

From God's Heart to Yours If we are to colabor with God through intercession, we need to learn to listen before we ask. Silence and waiting will not come easily at first, but as you practice this discipline, you will grow in it. Begin this week. During your time of intercession, wait silently before God before you speak. Begin with short segments of silence: They will expand as you become more comfortable with waiting. In time, you will discover that your prayers are coming right from the heart of God. You will be part of the magnificent process described by S. D. Gordon in his book *Quiet Talks on Prayer*.

It begins in the heart of God, sweeps down into a human heart upon the earth, so intersecting the circle of the earth, which is the battlefield of prayer, and then it goes back again to its starting point, having accomplished its purpose.

About the author: Lee Brase is the director of The Navigators' Prayer Ministry, a member of the National Prayer Committee, and member of the facilitating team for Pastors' Prayer Summits.

Lee coauthored, with Henry Helsabeck, the Bible study guide *Praying from God's Heart* (NavPress). He likes being with people who "know how to live a relaxed lifestyle among the lost."

Used by permission of *Pray!* Magazine. Copyright © 2006, The Navigators. Used by permission of NavPress. All Rights Reserved. To subscribe, visit www.praymag.com or call (800) 691-7729.