

Hearing God's Music

By Max Lucado

A Listening Heart

"Let he who has ears to hear, use them."

More than once Jesus said these words. Eight times in the Gospels and eight times in the Book of Revelation we are reminded that it's not enough just to have ears—it's necessary to use them.

In one of his parables Jesus compared our ears to soil. He told about a farmer who scattered seed (symbolic of the Word) in four different types of ground (symbolic of our ears). Some of our ears are like a hard road—unreceptive to the seed. Others have ears like rocky soil—we hear the Word but don't allow it to take root. Still others have ears akin to a weed patch—too overgrown, too thorny, with too much competition for the seed to have a chance. And then there are some who have ears that hear: well tilled, discriminate, and ready to hear God's voice.

Please note that in all four cases the seed is the same seed. The sower is the same sower. What's different is not the message or the messenger—it's the listener. And if the ratio in the story is significant, three-fourths of the world isn't listening to God's voice. Whether the cause be hard hearts, shallow lives, or anxious minds, 75 percent of us are missing the message.

It's not that we don't have ears; it's that we don't use them.

Scripture has always placed a premium on hearing God's voice. Indeed, the great command from God through Moses began with the words, "Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God is one Lord" (Deut. 6:4 KJV). Nehemiah and his men were commended because they were "attentive unto the book of the Law" (Neh. 8:3 KJV).

"Happy are those who listen to me" is the promise of Proverbs 8:34. Jesus urges us to learn to listen like sheep. "The sheep recognize his voice.... they follow because they are familiar with [the shepherd's] voice. They won't follow a stranger's voice but will scatter because they aren't used to the sound of it" (John 10:3–5 Msg). Each of the seven churches in Revelation is addressed in the same manner: "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches."

Our ears, unlike our eyes, do not have lids. They are to remain open, but how easily they close.

Denalyn and I were shopping for luggage sometime back. We found what we wanted in one store and told the salesclerk we were going to another store to compare prices. He asked me if I wanted to take his business card. I told him, "No, your name is easy to remember, Bob."

To which he replied, "My name is Joe." I had heard the man, but I hadn't listened.

Pilate didn't listen either. He had the classic case of ears that didn't hear. Not only did his wife warn him, "Don't do anything to that man, because he is innocent" (Matt. 27:19), but the very Word of Life stood before Pilate in his chamber and proclaimed, "Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to me" (John 18:37). But Pilate had selective hearing. He allowed the voices of the people to dominate the voices of conscience and the carpenter. "Their voices prevailed" (Luke 23:23 rsv).

In the end Pilate inclined his ear to the crowd and away from the Christ and ignored the message of the Messiah.

"Faith comes from hearing" (Rom. 10:17), and since Pilate didn't hear, he never found faith.

"Let he who has ears to hear, use them." How long has it been since you had your hearing checked?

When God throws seed your way, what is the result? May I raise a question or two to test how well you hear God's voice?

How Long Has It Been Since You Let God Have You?

I mean really *have* you? How long since you gave him a portion of undiluted, uninterrupted time listening for his voice? Apparently Jesus did. He made a deliberate effort to spend time with God.

Spend much time reading about the listening life of Jesus and a distinct pattern emerges. He spent regular time with God, praying and listening. Mark says, "Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed" (Mark 1:35 NIV). Luke tells us, "Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed" (Luke 5:16 NIV).

Let me ask the obvious. If Jesus, the Son of God, the sinless Savior of humankind, thought it worthwhile to clear his calendar to pray, wouldn't we be wise to do the same?

Not only did he spend regular time with God in prayer, he spent regular time in God's Word. Of course we don't find Jesus pulling a leather-bound New Testament from his satchel and reading it. We do, however, see the stunning example of Jesus, in the throes of the wilderness temptation, using the Word of God to deal with Satan. Three times he is tempted, and each time he repels the attack with the phrase: "It is written in the Scriptures" (Luke 4:4, 8, 12), and then he quotes a verse. Jesus is so familiar with Scripture that he not only knows the verse, he knows how to use it.

And then there's the occasion when Jesus was asked to read in the synagogue. He is handed the book of Isaiah the prophet. He finds the passage, reads it, and declares, "While you heard these words just now, they were coming true!" (Luke 4:21). We are given the picture of a person who knows his way around in Scripture and can recognize its fulfillment. If Jesus thought it wise to grow familiar with the Bible, shouldn't we do the same?

If we are to be just like Jesus—if we are to have ears that hear God's voice—then we have just found two habits worth imitating: the habits of prayer and Bible reading. Consider these verses:

"Base your happiness on your hope in Christ. When trials come endure them patiently; steadfastly maintain *the habit of prayer*". (Rom. 12:12 phillips, italics mine)

"The man who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and makes a habit of so doing, is not the man who hears and forgets. He puts that law into practice and he wins true happiness." (James 1:25 Phillips)

If we are to be just like Jesus, we must have a regular time of talking to God and listening to his Word.

Surrogate Spirituality

Wait a minute. Don't you do that. I know exactly what some of you are doing. You are tuning me out. *Lucado is talking about daily devotionals, eh? This is a good time for me to take a mental walk over to the fridge and see what we have to eat.*

I understand your reluctance. Some of us have tried to have a daily quiet time and have not been successful. Others of us have a hard time concentrating. And all of us are busy. So rather than spend time with God, listening for his voice, we'll let others spend time with him and then benefit from their experience. Let them tell us what God is saying. After all, isn't that why we pay preachers? Isn't that why we read Christian books? *These folks are good at daily devotions. I'll just learn from them.*

If that is your approach, if your spiritual experiences are secondhand and not firsthand, I'd like to challenge you with this thought: Do you do that with other parts of your life? I don't think so.

You don't do that with vacations. You don't say, "Vacations are such a hassle, packing bags and traveling. I'm going to send someone on vacation for me. When he returns, I'll hear all about it and be spared all the inconvenience." Would you do that? No! You want the experience firsthand. You want the sights firsthand, and you want to rest firsthand. Certain things no one can do for you.

You don't do that with romance. You don't say, "I'm in love with that wonderful person, but romance is such a hassle. I'm going to hire a surrogate lover to enjoy the romance in my place. I'll hear all about it and be spared the inconvenience." Who would do that? Perish the thought. You want the romance firsthand. You don't want to miss a word or a date, and you certainly don't want to miss the kiss, right? Certain things no one can do for you.

You don't let someone eat on your behalf, do you? You don't say, "Chewing is such a bother. My jaws grow so tired, and the variety of tastes is so overwhelming. I'm going to hire someone to chew my food, and I'll just swallow whatever he gives me." Would you do that? Yuck! Of course not! Certain things no one can do for you.

And one of those is spending time with God.

Listening to God is a firsthand experience. When he asks for your attention, God doesn't want you to send a substitute; he wants you. He invites *you* to vacation in his splendor. He invites *you* to feel the touch of his hand. He invites *you* to feast at his table. He wants to spend time with *you*. And with a little training, your time with God can be the highlight of your day.

A friend of mine married an opera soprano. She loves concerts. Her college years were spent in the music department, and her earliest memories are of keyboards and choir risers. He, on the other hand, leans more toward Monday Night Football and country music. He also loves his wife, so on occasion he attends an opera. The two sit side by side in the same auditorium, listening to the same music, with two completely different responses. He sleeps and she weeps.

I believe the difference is more than taste. It's training. She has spent hours learning to appreciate the art of music. He has spent none. Her ears are Geiger-counter sensitive. He can't differentiate between *staccato* and *legato*. But he is trying. Last time we talked about the concerts, he told me he is managing to stay awake. He may never have the same ear as his wife, but with time he is learning to listen and appreciate the music.

Learning to Listen

I believe we can, too. Equipped with the right tools, we can learn to listen to God. What are those tools? Here are the ones I have found helpful.

A regular time and place. Select a slot on your schedule and a corner of your world, and claim it for God. For some it may be best to do this in the morning. "In the morning my prayer comes before you" (Ps. 88:13 NIV). Others prefer the evening and agree with David's prayer, "Let my ... praise [be] like the evening sacrifice" (Ps. 141:2). Others prefer many encounters during the day. Apparently the author of Psalm 55 did. He wrote, "Evening, morning and noon I cry out" (v. 17 NIV).

Some sit under a tree, others in the kitchen. Maybe your commute to work or your lunch break would be appropriate. Find a time and place that seems right for you.

How much time should you take? As much as you need. Value quality over length. Your time with God should last long enough for you to say what you want and for God to say what he wants. Which leads us to a second tool you need—

An open Bible.

God speaks to us through his Word. The first step in reading the Bible is to ask God to help you understand it. "But the Helper will teach you everything and will cause you to remember all that I told you. This Helper is the Holy Spirit whom the Father will send in my name" (John 14:26).

Before reading the Bible, pray. Don't go to Scripture looking for your own idea; go searching for God's. Read the Bible prayerfully. Also, read the Bible carefully. Jesus told us, "Search, and you will find" (Matt. 7:7). God commends those who "chew on Scripture day and night" (Ps. 1:2 msg). The Bible is not a newspaper to be skimmed but rather a mine to be quarried. "Search for it like silver, and hunt for it like hidden treasure. Then you will understand respect for the Lord, and you will find that you know God" (Prov. 2:4–5).

Here is a practical point. Study the Bible a little at a time. God seems to send messages as he did his manna: one day's portion at a time. He provides "a command here, a command there. A rule here, a rule there. A little lesson here, a little lesson there" (Isa. 28:10). Choose depth over quantity. Read until a verse "hits" you, then stop and meditate on it. Copy the verse onto a sheet of paper, or write it in your journal, and reflect on it several times.

On the morning I wrote this, for example, my quiet time found me in Matthew 18. I was only four verses into the chapter when I read, "*The greatest person in the kingdom of heaven is the one who makes himself humble like this child.*" I needed to go no further. I copied the words in my journal and have pondered them on and off during the day. Several times I asked God, "How can I be more childlike?" By the end of the day, I was reminded of my tendency to hurry and my proclivity to worry.

Will I learn what God intends? If I listen, I will.

Don't be discouraged if your reading reaps a small harvest. Some days a lesser portion is all we need. A little girl returned from her first day at school. Her mom asked, "Did you learn anything?" "I guess not," the girl responded. "I have to go back tomorrow and the next day and the next day ..."

Such is the case with learning. And such is the case with Bible study. Understanding comes a little at a time over a lifetime.

There is a third tool for having a productive time with God. Not only do we need a regular time and an open Bible, we also need *a listening heart*. Don't forget the admonition from James: "The man who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and makes a habit of so doing, is not the man who hears and forgets. He puts that law into practice and he wins true happiness" (James 1:25 phillips).

We know we are listening to God when what we read in the Bible is what others see in our lives.

Perhaps you've heard the story of the not-so-bright fellow who saw an advertisement for a cruise. The sign in the travel agency window read "Cruise—\$100 Cash."

I've got a hundred dollars, he thought. *And I'd like to go on a cruise*. So he entered the door and announced his desires. The fellow at the desk asked for the money, and the not-too-bright guy started counting it out. When he got to one hundred, he was whacked over the head and knocked out cold. He woke up in a barrel floating down a river. Another sucker in another barrel floated past and asked him, "Say, do they serve lunch on this cruise?"

The not-too-bright fellow answered, "They didn't last year."

It's one thing not to know. It's another to know and not learn. Paul urged his readers to put into practice what they had learned from him. "What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, do" (Phil. 4:9 rsv).

If you want to be just like Jesus, let God have you. Spend time listening for him until you receive your lesson for the day—then apply it.

I have another question to check your hearing. Read it, and see how well you do.

How Long Since You Let God Love You?

My daughters are too old for this now, but when they were young—crib-size and diaper-laden—I would come home, shout their names, and watch them run to me with extended arms and squealing voices. For the next few moments we would speak the language of love. We'd roll on the floor, gobble bellies, and tickle tummies and laugh and play.

We delighted in each other's presence. They made no requests of me, with the exception of "Let's play, Daddy." And I made no demands of them, except, "Don't hit Daddy with the hammer."

My kids let me love them.

But suppose my daughters had approached me as we often approach God. "Hey, Dad, glad you're home. Here is what I want. More toys. More candy. And can we go to Disneyland this summer?"

"Whoa," I would have wanted to say. "I'm not a waiter, and this isn't a restaurant. I'm your father, and this is our house. Why don't you just climb up on Daddy's lap and let me tell you how much I love you?"

Ever thought God might want to do the same with you? *Oh, he wouldn't say that to me*. He wouldn't?

Then to whom was he speaking when he said, "I have loved you with an everlasting love" (Jer. 31:3 NIV)? Was he playing games when he said, "Nothing ... will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ" (Rom. 8:39)? Buried in the seldom-quarried mines of the minor prophets is this jewel:

The Lord your God is with you; the mighty One will save you. He will rejoice over you. You will rest in his love; he will sing and be joyful about you. (Zeph. 3:17)

Don't move too quickly through that verse. Read it again and prepare yourself for a surprise.

The Lord your God is with you; the mighty One will save you. He will rejoice over you. You will rest in his love; he will sing and be joyful about you. (Zeph. 3:17)

Note who is active and who is passive. Who is singing, and who is resting? Who is rejoicing over his loved one, and who is being rejoiced over?

We tend to think we are the singers and God is the “singee.” Most certainly that is often the case. But apparently there are times when God wishes we would just be still and (what a stunning thought!) let him sing over us.

I can see you squirming. You say you aren’t worthy of such affection? Neither was Judas, but Jesus washed his feet. Neither was Peter, but Jesus fixed him breakfast. Neither were the Emmaus-bound disciples, but Jesus took time to sit at their table.

Besides, who are we to determine if we are worthy? Our job is simply to be still long enough to let him have us and let him love us.

Do You Hear the Music?

I’m going to conclude by telling you a story you’ve heard before, though you’ve not heard it as I am going to tell it. But you have heard it. Surely you have, for you are in it. You are one of the characters. It is the story of the dancers who had no music.

Can you imagine how hard that would be? Dancing with no music? Day after day they came to the great hall just off the corner of Main and Broadway. They brought their wives. They brought their husbands. They brought their children and their hopes. They came to dance.

The hall was prepared for a dance. Streamers strung, punch bowls filled. Chairs were placed against the walls. People arrived and sat, knowing they had come to a dance but not knowing how to dance because they had no music. They had balloons; they had cake. They even had a stage on which the musicians could play, but they had no musicians.

One time a lanky fellow claimed to be a musician. He sure looked the part, what with his belly-length beard and fancy violin. All stood the day he stood before them and pulled the violin out of the case and placed it beneath his chin. *Now we will dance*, they thought, but they were wrong. For though he had a violin, his violin had no strings. The pushing and pulling of his bow sounded like the creaking of an unoiled door. Who can dance to a sound like that? So the dancers took their seats again.

Some tried to dance without the music. One wife convinced her husband to give it a try, so out on the floor they stepped, she dancing her way and he dancing his. Both efforts were commendable—but far from compatible. He danced some form of partnerless tango, while she was spinning like a ballerina. A few tried to follow their cue, but since there was no cue, they didn’t know how to follow. The result was a dozen or so dancers with no music, going this way and that, bumping into each other and causing more than one observer to seek safety behind a chair.

Over time, however, those dancers grew weary, and everyone resumed the task of sitting and staring and wondering if anything was ever going to happen. And then one day it did.

Not everyone saw him enter. Only a few. Nothing about his appearance would compel your attention. His looks were common, but his music was not. He began to sing a song, soft and sweet, kind and compelling. His song took the chill out of the air and brought a summer-sunset glow to the heart. And as he sang, people stood—a few at first, then many—and they began to dance. Together. Flowing to a music they had never heard before, they danced.

Some, however, remained seated. What kind of musician is this who never mounts the stage? Who brings no band? Who has no costume? Why, musicians don’t just walk in off the street. They have an entourage, a reputation, a persona to project and protect. Why, this fellow scarcely mentioned his name!

“How can we know what you sing is actually music?” they challenged.

His reply was to the point: “Let the man who has ears to hear use them.”

But the nondancers refused to hear. So they refused to dance. Many still refuse. The musician comes and sings. Some dance. Some don’t. Some find music for life; others live in silence. To those who miss the music, the musician gives the same appeal: “Let the man who has ears to hear use them.”

A regular time and place.

An open Bible.

An open heart.

Let God have you, and let God love you—

and don't be surprised if your heart begins to hear music you've never heard and your feet learn to dance as never before.

—
I will be in them and you will be in me so that they will be completely one. Then the world will know that you sent me and that you loved them just as much as you loved me.

John 17:23

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