

Visit Tyndale's exciting Web site at www.tyndale.com

Copyright © 2004 by Marilyn Hontz. All rights reserved.

Cover photograph copyright © by Sexto Sol/Getty Images. All rights reserved.

Author photograph copyright © 2003 by Brad Lampe. All rights reserved.

Designed by Jenny Swanson

Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are taken from the *Holy Bible*, New International Version®. NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Publishing House. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked NLT are taken from the *Holy Bible*, New Living Translation, copyright © 1996. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Wheaton, Illinois 60189. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked TLB are taken from *The Living Bible*, copyright © 1971. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Wheaton, Illinois 60189. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked "NKJV" are taken from the New King James Version. Copyright © 1979, 1980, 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked TNIV are taken from the Holy Bible, Today's New International Version™. Copyright © 2001 by International Bible Society. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked MLB are taken from The Modern Language Bible: The New Berkeley Version in Modern English copyright © 1969 by Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., Peabody, Massachusetts. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Hontz, Marilyn.

Listening for God : how an ordinary person can learn to hear God speak / Marilyn Hontz.
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 0-8423-8539-8 (sc)

1. Word of God (Theology) 2. Revelation. 3. Listening—Religious aspects—Christianity. I. Title.

BT180.W67H66 2004

231.7—dc22

2003022001

Printed in the United States of America

08 07 06 05 04
6 5 4 3 2 1

CONTENTS

<i>Introduction</i>	xi
PART 1: RECOGNIZING GOD'S VOICE WHILE READING SCRIPTURE	
<i>Chapter 1: Words to Live By</i>	3
<i>Chapter 2: God in the Ordinary</i>	13
<i>Chapter 3: Finding God in His Word</i>	25
PART 2: RECOGNIZING GOD'S VOICE WHILE PRAYING	
<i>Chapter 4: "Lord, Teach Me to Pray"</i>	41
<i>Chapter 5: Adventures in Listening Prayer</i>	51
<i>Chapter 6: Finding God in Prayer</i>	63
<i>Chapter 7: Bringing Prayer out of the Closet</i>	77
<i>Chapter 8: When Praying Isn't Easy</i>	89
<i>Chapter 9: Capturing the Spirit of Prayer: Slinky the Caterpillar</i>	113
PART 3: RECOGNIZING GOD'S VOICE WHILE LISTENING	
<i>Chapter 10: Stopping to Listen</i>	123
<i>Chapter 11: Does God Speak to His Children?</i>	139
<i>Chapter 12: How Does God Speak to His Children?</i>	151
<i>Chapter 13: Reaping the Rewards of Listening</i>	171
<i>Appendix A: Bible Study Tools</i>	191
<i>Appendix B: A Prayer Test</i>	195
<i>Appendix C: T.A.W.G. (Time Alone with God)</i>	197
<i>Endnotes</i>	205

Introduction

September 21, 1966. As the fighting heated up in my brother's Marine unit in Vietnam, our family was facing a battle of another kind. My mother had just returned from a nearly two-month stay at UCLA Medical Center. I had missed her terribly and was relieved to have her home.

My older sister, Joyce, called me into the den to see our mother. "Mother is asking for you, Marilyn," she said. "Try not to cry, honey," she added kindly as she softly closed the door behind me.

I sat down next to my mother, who lay on a pullout sofa bed. With the exception of Buttons, our Chihuahua, who guarded her with fierce loyalty, our small den resembled a sterile hospital room. A green oxygen tank stood sentry beside her bed. I could hear hushed conversations outside the door.

My mother looked pale and thin. Her high cheekbones were even more pronounced because of her weight loss. She seemed

so fragile that I was almost afraid to touch her. Her dark brown eyes searched mine and she smiled. She gently reached for my hand, pulled me close, and just held me for a few minutes.

"Honey, I need to share something with you," Mother finally said. "My disease is not going to heal." She did not use the word *cancer*, but I knew. Her breast cancer had spread. I couldn't believe it! I had been begging God to heal her. Only a few days before I had told the Lord that I had all the faith in the world that he would heal her. I truly believed he would.

I had reminded God that he needed my mother on earth! *After all, I had told him, she teaches Bible studies at two churches. She gives devotions at my public school's PTO meetings. (Quite a privilege, considering that all the other committee members were Jewish. They loved my mother!) She is a great pastor's wife, plus you know that she is very good at introducing people to you. Most importantly, I need her here on earth! Children are not supposed to lose their mother when they are fourteen, I had pleaded.*

Now I was faced with the stark reality that God was not answering my prayers the way I had expected. I threw myself on my mother, sobbing and clinging to her as if I were in a tug-of-war with death itself. She let me grieve as she held me.

"Why hasn't God answered your prayers?" I demanded. "He usually does."

She responded with an honest, simple answer: "Honey, I really don't know. I do know that the Lord has assured me that you will be okay."

I remember thinking, *Oh, that's easy for you to say; you are going away, and I am staying here.*

Frankly, I was afraid to lose her. My brother, Cliff, the Marine, was eight years older than I. (The Red Cross had located him in battle and allowed him to come home to say good-bye to our mother.) My sister, Joyce, was twenty years older and lived with her family two hours away. My dad was

a busy pastor, but we were not emotionally close. My mother was the nurturing parent—my teacher, my mentor, and my friend. My life revolved around her and *her* relationship with God.

We talked a bit more about who was going to take care of me after she died. She began struggling for air in spite of the respirator and was obviously in great pain. My family decided she needed to return to the hospital. We loaded her into our station wagon and rode with her back to the medical center. After a nurse quickly got her ready for bed, I leaned down, kissed her good night, and told her I loved her. As I was leaving her room, I said, “I’m not going to school tomorrow, so I will see you in the morning.”

She smiled and said, “Okay.” Those were our last words. She died early the next morning. I felt abandoned by my mother, and my strongest connection to God died with her.

LIVING LEGACY

My mother was the first person who modeled prayer and listening to God for me. She prayed with me before I left for school each day. She prayed with people over the phone. Often I would see her talking with someone one moment and then praying with that person the next.

I knew the Bible was the most important book to her. She always kept memory verses, printed on cards, in her purse. Each Saturday morning we sat in our kitchen as she disciplined me from a Bible workbook for kids. I loved licking the Bible picture stamps and placing them in the book. I looked forward to these special one-on-one times with my mom. It was during those Saturday sessions that I came to realize my mother considered God her dearest friend.

When I was twelve, I told my mother I didn’t have any friends. We talked about it, and then she prayed with me that the Lord would bring a friend into my life. After we prayed, she

said she had an idea. She suggested that the next day I look around the lunchroom for another girl who was eating lunch alone and ask if I could join her. That is how I met my friend Julie. Not long after we met, I invited Julie over to our house. Before the end of her first visit, my mother had led her to know Jesus in a personal way. My mother wasn't pushy; it was just second nature for her to acquaint people with her dearest Friend.

Only days before she died, I asked her if I could read to her from the Bible. She said, "Read the first chapter of Colossians from the *Living Letters* version." As I began to read to her, I noticed that she was quoting from memory, word for word, the entire chapter! She lived in what I call a "vibrant communication" with her heavenly Father. Prayer was simply her way of talking with God about *everything*.

I wanted the kind of relationship with God that my mother had. Instead, I felt like I was hanging on to her spiritual apron strings and following behind her. What was her secret of being so close to Jesus?

A short time after my mother's death, my sister, Joyce, began sorting my mother's things. She discovered a cupboard full of prayer journals and notebooks. I had not seen them before, and it was powerful to look through the pages and see Mother's familiar handwriting. I flipped through one journal and saw my name, the date, and details on how she was praying for me at that specific time.

One of those notebooks contained a story about a missionary doctor. My sister had discovered its significance to our mother when she came home for a visit during Mother's illness. Quietly entering Mother's bedroom when she arrived, Joyce thought Mother was asleep until she noticed her smiling. When she asked what had happened, Mother said, "Oh, Joyce honey, I've had the most wonderful experience."

She told Joyce that she was reading a book about Dr. Paul

Carlson, a medical missionary to the Democratic Republic of Congo (once Zaire) in the 1960s. She'd just been reading about how he had been running toward the safety of a stone wall by the mission compound when Congolese rebels had shot him to death. The area was liberated only fifteen minutes later—but of course that was fifteen minutes too late for him.

Mother said that when she'd come to that part of Dr. Carlson's story, she had put the book down, furious at God for allowing this dedicated doctor to die.

After all, she had mentally shouted at God, he was only in his thirties. He was a doctor, hard at work to heal people and further your cause. Why did you do that to him? Why did you cut him down in the prime of his life and ministry? What mean joke were you playing on him? You let him go to Africa and serve you, and then you allow him to be shot just as he was about to reach the safety of the stone wall?

"Of course," said Mother, "what I was really downright mad about was why God allowed *me* to have such a ministry, one that was so blessed by his touch, when he was planning on taking me. Why now?" It was the first time Joyce had heard her admit that she was terminally ill. The moment tore Joyce apart and she began to weep.

"Don't cry, honey," Mother said. "Do you know how the Lord answered my questions about Dr. Carlson?"

"No, how?" Joyce asked. (She was thinking, *I should have known he'd answer her!*)

"Well, the Lord seemed to be saying, 'Marion, you think Dr. Carlson was busy and effective for me and my work there in the Congo? Oh, Marion, you should see him now!'" Mother's eyes glistened with tears as she continued, "'Marion, my dear child, you think you're busy there in Reseda, California? Just wait till you get here!'"¹

¹Joyce Landorf Heatherley, *Mourning Song* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Fleming H. Revell, 1994), 84–85.

My mother sensed the Lord speaking to her about her circumstances through the story of Dr. Carlson. She experienced an abiding peace as God spoke to her heart.

When Joyce told me about their conversation, I realized that my mother had struggled with many of the same questions that I had. At some point in her battle against breast cancer, she knew her earthly life would be cut short. She was teaching Bible studies, she was helping women come to know God, and she still had me, a young teenager, at home. Surely God's timing was off! It just didn't make sense.

Yet, she found out that God could handle her anger with him, and she experienced an abiding peace that enabled her to relinquish me completely into her loving heavenly Father's arms.

As I sat next to her in the den the night before she died, I remember her telling me: "Marilyn, while I will not be able to meet your husband or hold your babies in my arms, I am 'holding' them in prayer. I have been praying for your future husband and your future children."

She was planting seeds of prayer deeply in the soil of my heart—seeds that would sprout years later. I would learn that although human life is limited, our prayers have no boundaries. They can stretch out over generations. "Prayers are deathless," said E. M. Bounds. "Prayers outlive the lives of those who uttered them; outlive a generation, outlive an age, outlive a world."² Today I believe my husband and children still reap the effects of her mighty, prevailing prayers.

Although I didn't fully understand it then, I had found my mother's secret! She talked everything over with the Lord, taking time to listen for his response. Though God didn't speak audibly to her, she received a quiet inner impression from the Holy Spirit that gave her peace. He flooded her with his *partici-*

²Leonard Ravenhill, comp., *A Treasury of Prayer* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Bethany House Publishers, 1961), 61.

pating presence. Even when she faced her own death, she was filled with an incredible sense of calm because she recognized her heavenly Father's voice and he had given her his perspective on eternity.

AN ADVENTURE IN LISTENING

What about you? Do you long to approach God as you would a dear friend? Is it truly possible for you to hear God speak today? You can learn to recognize God's voice, if you listen! You don't need to be a super-religious person to hear from God. All you need is a hunger for him and a listening ear.

I have found what many have discovered: God speaks to each of us through his Holy Word, and he communicates with us as we pray. He whispers to us through his Holy Spirit in the quietness of our hearts. He does this because he wants us to be in an intimate relationship with him—a relationship he desired before we were even created. A. W. Tozer said, “[God] waits to be wanted. Too bad that with many of us He waits so long, so very long, in vain.”³ He waits for *you* to want him!

If God wants to open his heart to us, why is it so difficult to hear his voice? How do we respond when we feel like God is ignoring our pleas, as I felt while watching my mother's life slip away?

The rest of this book explores my adventures in learning to hear God speak through the Word and prayer as I stilled myself and listened for his voice. My journey has not always been a smooth, easy one, and my aim is not to tell you *how* to build your devotional life. Rather, I hope the Scriptures and my personal experiences will create in you a deep hunger to spend time in God's presence and learn to recognize his voice.

Listening is a lot like waiting. When we're in the midst of either, we often feel like we are wasting time. Paradoxically, some of God's greatest gifts come in the still hours we spend in

³A. W. Tozer, *The Pursuit of God* (Camp Hill, Penn.: Christian Publications, Inc., 1993), 17.

MARILYN HONTZ

his presence. When we really learn to hear God's voice, we allow him to share his plans with us and actually involve us in his work! We never know what truth God will show us or how he will impact others through us, but one thing is sure: Life becomes an adventure.

God is always listening to you. He invites you to listen to him as well. "Be still, and know that I am God," he says to you (Psalm 46:10). Listen. . . .

Words to Live By

By age thirty, I seemed to have put the pain of my mother's death behind me. I had married Paul, a caring man, when I was twenty. Now, ten years into our marriage, he was pastoring a growing church. I was busy launching a women's ministries program, playing the piano during worship services, teaching Bible studies, and housing guests. My husband and I were also rearing three daughters, aged six and under.

While my life may have appeared perfect on the outside, I was miserable inside. After my mother's death, I had desperately wanted to connect with my dad as I had with my mother. I had longed for him to put his arms around me and tell me that he loved me. I had tried to please my dad and live up to his expectations, but I never quite felt good enough and sensed I was a burden to him. While I believe that deep down he loved me, it seemed as if we were miles apart emotionally. I kept hoping that my dad would change, but he never did.

Seeds of bitterness that had been planted during my teen years were growing and choking the life out of me. I likened my bitterness to a pair of handcuffs. My hand was in one cuff and my dad's hand was in the other, and I ended up mentally dragging him with me wherever I went each day. But dwelling on and rehearsing the hurts he had caused kept me in bondage. The old saying "Bitterness is like acid; it only eats up the container that holds it" is true. I was being eaten alive.

DRAWN TO THE BOOK

A step toward change came in a surprising way. That summer I received my first invitation to speak at a conference. I was asked to speak on the topic "Daily Devotions" at a youth convention in Urbana, Illinois, during the upcoming Christmas break. When I first received the invitation, I groaned inwardly. First of all, the thought of speaking to two thousand teens was frightening; I had never enjoyed public speaking. Second, and more important, how could I teach something I did not do myself? Others probably assumed I read my Bible daily. After all, I loved God, I had been raised in a pastor's home, and I was a pastor's wife.

Actually, although I knew the importance of reading the Bible, I had thought I could get by just reading it once in a while or on Sundays. I justified this by assuring myself that the Lord understood how busy I was with church and family matters. I just had too much to do to have a regular quiet time.

God was getting my *leftover* time, if even that. I couldn't remember the last time I had given him my *best* time. As I prayed about speaking to those teens, I knew I could only accept that speaking invitation if I got into the Word myself. Bothered by my lack of discipline and pressed by the conference organizers to give them an answer, I sought out Joy, another pastor's wife.

"Do you have devotions every day?" I asked her. She said,

“Yes, I do. I’ve been doing it consistently for the past five years.”

I was amazed! Joy had four young children, yet she had read her Bible every day for the past five years. “How do you do it, and how do I get started?” I asked with much skepticism. Her answer dramatically changed the way I read Scripture.

READ UNTIL GOD SPEAKS TO YOU

“Start today!” she challenged. “Ask God to speak to you from his Word, and read until he shows you an insight, promise, correction, or encouragement.” So that was it. *Read the Word of God until the Lord speaks to you.*

I whined that I didn’t think I had the discipline to do this every day. Joy reminded me that doing something for twenty-one days makes it become a habit. I was still skeptical. “Marilyn,” Joy said, “simply read the Word until God speaks to you. You may read only one paragraph, but if you sense your heavenly Father stopping you, then pause and see what God wants to do with that passage in your life for that day.”

Since the Word of God contains powerful truths, it will take considerable time to digest it, she said. Joy encouraged me to keep a notebook and write down the verse that I sensed God speaking to me about.

As I considered Joy’s advice, I realized that deep inside I was tired of my excuses for not being in the Word on a daily basis. I wanted to do something about it. I wasn’t merely feeling a guilt trip brought on by the upcoming speaking engagement; I was being convicted by the Holy Spirit. For the first time, I was hungry for the Bread of Life.

I began to read the Word at night before I went to bed. I started at the beginning of the Bible and read until I sensed the Holy Spirit wanted me to catch something. Sometimes I read only a few verses before I stopped. Sometimes I read a couple of chapters, but there was always a truth for me to learn. I also

MARILYN HONTZ

read some psalms each day, as they comforted me in my continued inward struggle over the lack of connection with my dad.

I read with an expectation that God would, indeed, speak to my heart. Most nights a word, verse, or phrase seemed to lift off the page at me. I was amazed at how many verses just “happened” to fit with my experiences that day.

During this time before the conference, I read Psalm 119. Verses 16 and 18 caught my attention: “I delight in your decrees; I will not neglect your word” (v. 16). “Open my eyes that I may see wonderful things in your law” (v. 18).

Lord Jesus, I prayed, please help me not to neglect your Word any longer. Open my eyes to see the wonderful things you want to teach me. Help me to be disciplined in this. It is important to you and it is essential for me. Help me see that I cannot live one day without your Living Word. The Lord did, in fact, help me to begin hungering for his Word.

Five months later, I stood before those two thousand teens and shared how a thirty-year-old woman had finally gotten into the Word. I urged them not to wait so long. After the session, many teens (and adults) told me that they too struggled to read the Bible daily. Some confessed that while they were eager to read (and reread) love letters from their boyfriend or girlfriend, they lacked the same desire to read the Bible—God’s “love letter” to them.

DRAWING ON THE BOOK

The energy and joy I felt after speaking at Urbana quickly turned into anxiety when I returned home to discover that some conflicts within our church were about to boil over. A group of about thirty from our fellowship desired to go in a different direction from what the church leadership had planned. Every day during this trying time, I poured out my heart to God. Did the Word of God have answers for this difficult situation? I wondered.

I soon had my answer, as the psalms I read came alive and seemed to have been written just for me. The psalm writers addressed the very issues I was experiencing—betrayal, unfair treatment, and the desire to escape to a far-off place. Psalm 55:6-8 in particular spoke powerfully to me: “Oh, that I had the wings of a dove! I would fly away and be at rest—I would flee far away and stay in the desert; I would hurry to my place of shelter, far from the tempest and storm.”

*I lie in the dust,
completely
discouraged;
revive me by
your word.*

Psalm 119:25, NLT

I became desperate for God and searched my Bible each night for a thread of hope. I wanted to leave our congregation, but Paul did not feel released by the Lord to do so. Because this difficult situation lasted a few years, I was forced to stay in the Word. Later I saw how the Lord used the pain of those experiences to shape me solely by his Word. Would I seek human help, or would I go to the Lord first?

As the dissension persisted, I wrote over and over in my journal, “Father, how long is this going to go on?” Yet I ended every page with a promise from Scripture that the Lord would work out his purposes.

My journal entry for December 28, 1983, reads, “Dear Father, help me to trust you during these next few months. We have received a ‘prophecy’ from a disgruntled person in the congregation who says that ‘God is going to close the doors of Central Wesleyan Church at the close of December 1983.’ Is this true?” It continues, “I wonder what 1984 holds? Father, the situation we are going through is so desperate . . . these are rough days, please give us clear direction. I feel so frightened. Do you want us to leave Central? I sometimes get the feeling we should leave. Either help us overcome or let us go—whatever you want.” My journal entry for that day concluded with Ephesians 3:20 (TLB): “Now glory be to God who by his mighty power at

MARILYN HONTZ

work within us is able to do far more than we would ever dare to ask or even dream of—infinately beyond our highest prayers, desires, thoughts, or hopes.”

In spite of that bright promise, it didn't seem possible that God could do *anything* through us, let alone do “far more than we would ever dare to ask.” It was hard to trust him because of all the hurt we were experiencing.

December of 1983 came and went and the church doors were still open. However, by May 1984 discouragement and depression lay heavy on our hearts. My journal reveals that “we have learned that our ‘friends’ have turned against us. This is a hard rejection to take, Father. I know that you understand how we feel.”

Thirty people had left to form a new church. I was tired of seeing my husband hurt. “Honey,” I said one evening when he returned very late from a board meeting, “I will gladly pack our bags if you will just give me the okay.” Paul still did not feel at peace about leaving.

WORDS FROM ANOTHER

In the midst of my despair, I learned that sometimes God enables others to comfort us through his Word. One afternoon, as I was kneeling beside my bed praying about the heavy cloud of discouragement I was under, the phone rang. My father-in-law had been praying for us and was calling to share a verse he had just read. “I believe this verse is for you and Paul. Listen: ‘But the God of all grace, who has called you to His eternal glory in Christ, will, after you have *suffered awhile*, Himself *equip, stabilize, strengthen, and firmly establish you*’ (1 Peter 5:10, MLB, italics mine).”

What a comforting verse! My father-in-law, who lived twenty-five hundred miles away, had been in the Word and was prompted by the Holy Spirit to share that verse with us at exactly the perfect time.

Later I asked the Lord, *Is it possible that you will indeed equip, stabilize, strengthen, and establish us?* I wanted so desperately to believe that. I had nothing else to encourage me, so I clung to that promise. I was at the bottom of a deep well. The sides were so slippery that I could not climb out myself. It was as if the Lord reached down to where I was in that dark hole and pulled me out with his strong arm and with that verse.

I rejoice in your word like one who finds a great treasure.

Psalms 119:162, NLT

Not long after that phone call, both my husband and I began to feel the oppression lift. Our church had an incredible time of prayer one Sunday. Many people prayed for church unity and forgiveness, and we felt a renewed spirit among the congregation. We had new joy and enthusiasm; God's church was going forward. More than twenty-five years later, we are still pastoring in that same church.

I have learned the most about God and myself through difficult situations. At such times, God strips away all other comforts and crutches and teaches us to rely on him alone.

HEALING A PAST WOUND

As the tension within our church abated, the deep heart wound I still carried over the lack of relationship with my dad began to ache again. It was so deep that only the Lord Jesus could reach down far enough to remove the bitterness that had been growing over the years.

One evening as I was reading the book of Nehemiah, I came to these words: "Remember me with favor, O my God, for all I have done for these people" (Nehemiah 5:19). (Nehemiah had served as governor for twelve years.)

I laughed out loud. *Father*, I mused, *do you know what Nehemiah wanted from you? He wanted affirmation!* All of a sudden, I was stopped short by a voice inside my heart.

Yes, Marilyn, and that is exactly what you want—affirmation. You are not going to get that from your dad, but if you come to me I will affirm you.

Those words penetrated me very deeply. I was not used to the Holy Spirit speaking in a still, small voice. It was not an audible voice but rather an inner impression. I cannot explain exactly what happened in that moment, but as I was reading Scripture, the *Scripture read me!* I knew that I needed to forgive my dad for his years of neglect and abandonment in my life.

I began to weep. *Oh, Father, I do want his affirmation so badly. Every time I talk to my dad I always hope he will change. He never does. I understand that I cannot fix my dad. Lord Jesus, even though my dad may not be able to change, I can change with your help.*

Forgiveness began to wash over me. I had struggled to forgive my dad for years. Yet when I heard my heavenly Father speak those words to me, something broke free within me. It was cleansing; it was healing; and it was instantaneous. True, my dad hadn't changed, but I was different. The Lord began to replace my bitterness with compassion for my father. I had been waiting to *heal* first and then forgive him. The Lord showed me that I needed to heal by forgiving him first.

I was amazed at the way a passage of Scripture could bring such a major life change to me. That passage from Nehemiah doesn't even mention the topic of forgiveness. It was simply the Word and the Spirit of God moving powerfully in my thoughts and emotions.

God spoke his promises of healing to me through other verses as well: "The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit" (Psalm 34:18), and he stands "at the right hand of the needy one" (Psalm 109:31). I experienced firsthand Psalm 107:20: "He sent forth his word and healed them." When I was very needy, the Lord used his "living and active" Word to heal my damaged emotions (Hebrews 4:12). He extracted the root of bitterness within me.

By this point I realized that I could not live without the Word of God on a daily basis. God had shown me how his Word could help me with a large assignment, such as speaking to the teens. He'd also demonstrated that the Word could bring comfort during a rough church situation and healing to deep-seated bitterness. I had seen for myself how the Bible brought great hope in those crisis times. Now I was ready to see if God would speak to me from his Word in everyday, ordinary situations.

Bible Study Tools

Step into the Bible section of any bookstore and you are likely to be overwhelmed by the wide variety of Bibles and study tools available. If Bible study is new to you—or you just want a reminder of what is available—the following information will help orient you to the tools you can use as you study Scripture.*

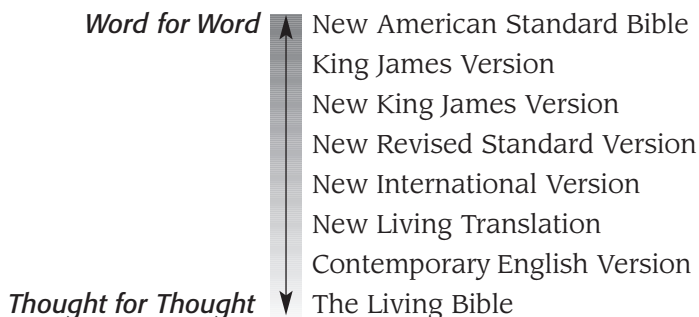
Bible Versions

In general, Bible translators approach their task with either a “word for word” or a “thought for thought” approach. A “word for word” translator attempts to translate each word of the original language as precisely as possible—and to follow the original word order and sentence structure as much as possible too. These translations are particularly valuable for those who

*If reading the Bible is new to you, *No-Brainer’s Guide to the Bible* (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House, 2001) by James S. Bell Jr. and James Dyet may be helpful. It contains an overview of each book of the Bible, along with a one-year Bible reading program and other helpful features.

have some familiarity with Scripture and want to study passages at a more scholarly level.

The goal of the “thought for thought” translator is to produce the closest natural equivalent of the message expressed in the original text—both in meaning and style. The goal is to be accurate *and* readable. These translations are particularly valuable to those who are new to the Bible and want the clearest wording possible.



Other Study Tools

Bible Atlas—Many Bibles include a few maps at the back, but if you’re a visual learner you may appreciate having a complete book of maps so you can locate places mentioned in Scripture.

Concordance—This tool provides an alphabetical listing of words mentioned in the Bible, along with the Scripture references where each is found. It is a handy tool to help you locate a verse when all you remember is a word or phrase from it. Again, many Bibles contain an abbreviated version; however, you may wish to invest in a complete concordance.

Commentaries—As the name implies, these tools include comments from Bible scholars on a book of the Bible. They can help provide the context and background that makes reading Scripture come alive! Shop carefully for these, since some are geared toward scholars while others are written with the novice in mind.

Bible Dictionary—Like a regular dictionary, a Bible dictionary lists topics alphabetically. It provides correct spellings and—more important—additional information on various biblical topics.

A Prayer Test

What kind of pray-er are you?*

1. *Crisis Pray-er*—You pray only when there is a problem.
2. *Casual Pray-er*—You pray when you have the time or when you remember. You don't set aside a regular time to pray.
3. *Committed Pray-er*—You have a set, daily time of prayer. You pray for those for whom you've promised you would.
4. *Intercessor*—You pray daily. You continue to pray for the needs of others long after others have stopped praying about those needs. Prayer is foremost on your heart; it is your passion.

*Dr. Alvin J. VanderGriend, national facilitator of Lighthouse Ministries for the Mission America Coalition, challenged me with this prayer test. Used with permission.

T.A.W.G. (*Time Alone with God*)

Listening for God's voice in the everyday moments of life will bring you greater joy and purpose. That is why I have made this the focus of *Listening for God*. However, I have also discovered great value in devoting several hours now and then—even an occasional day—to inviting God to speak to my heart.

The acronym T.A.W.G. (Time Alone with God) is commonly recognized within the denomination in which my husband and I minister. Our church's pastors and staff members are encouraged to take a D.A.W.G. (Day Alone with God) once a month to refocus on the Lord and his calling on their life. Because I believe the practice will enrich the life of any Christian, I regularly recommend it to others.

T.A.W.G. can take many forms. You might choose to spend an *hour* with God (H.A.W.G.) or an entire *day* with him (D.A.W.G.). Regardless of how much time you set aside to have a T.A.W.G., I suggest that you plan a flexible agenda and find a solitary place.

An agenda will give you direction and keep your mind focused. Perhaps you will decide to read and reflect upon a book of the Bible, such as Ephesians. Or maybe you will come prepared to study all the words on grace in the Bible. You may even plan to take a nap. (Sometimes sleeping is the most spiritual thing you can do.)

Make sure your agenda is flexible enough, however, for the Holy Spirit to break through and adjust your goals. I offer some suggestions to help you plan your own T.A.W.G. day. You may wish to incorporate some of these ideas or plan something else entirely. This is an appointment between you and your Heavenly Father.

What to bring:

- your Bible
- a pen
- a notepad or journal
- a desire to be with God, hear from God, and enjoy God

This time alone with the Lord is not an obligation, but an incredible opportunity. It is never a duty for God to spend time with *you*.

1. Find a place that is free from distractions.

Get alone, and “plan to neglect” other things. Jesus himself had to do the same thing.

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. Simon and his companions went to look for him, and when they found him, they exclaimed: “Everyone is looking for you!” (Mark 1:35-37, emphasis mine)

Jesus not only got away to a solitary place, but he also encouraged his disciples to do the same. There will always be

people who want you or things that need your attention. Jesus experienced this on earth as well. He knows how much we need these times of restoration.

Then, because so many people were coming and going that they did not even have a chance to eat, he said to [the disciples], "Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest." So they went away by themselves in a boat to a solitary place. (Mark 6:31-32, emphasis mine)

2. Once you are at your solitary place, picture Jesus waiting for you.

There is pure joy on his face at the sight of you. The Lord longs for you and treasures you more than you realize. A. W. Tozer said, "He waits to be wanted."

3. Quiet yourself, and then ask for the Lord's presence.

Dear Father, I want to be still and close to you. Help me to quiet the noisy places in my life. Help me to let go of all that I am currently preoccupied with and instead to be preoccupied with your Son, Jesus. I now invite you, Holy Spirit, who is full of peace, to rain down on me. Help me to hear your voice only. I pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

4. If distractions come to your thoughts (and they will), ask the Lord to help you focus on him.

You may suddenly remember something that you must do. Write it down on your notepad to do later. Remember that Satan is the "master distracter." He does not want you to have time alone with the Lord Jesus. Remember St. Francis of Assisi's words: "If your heart wanders or is distracted, bring it back and replace it tenderly in the presence of the Master. Even if you have to do this all hour—your hour would still be well

employed." That is encouraging! Our time with the Lord is never wasted time.

5. Begin with adoration and praise to the Lord.

*Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise.
(Psalm 100:4)*

- Take time to adore him.
- Dwell on his names from Scripture: Prince of Peace, Counselor, Great Physician, King of kings, Burden Bearer, and Friend of sinners, to name a few.
- Which of his names do you need him to be for you right now?
- Praise him for who he is.
- Praise him, as well, for the difficult situations in your life right now.
- Praise him that he can be trusted and that he has his children's best interests at heart.

6. Seek to confess any known sin.

"Search me, O God, and know my heart . . . see if there is any offensive way in me" (Psalm 139:23-24). I realize that sin separates me from you and muffles your voice. Please, Lord, help hold me still so that your Holy Spirit may search me.

At this point, stop and be quiet before the Lord. Listen.

- Did the Lord reveal anything?
- Are you holding bitterness or resentment toward someone?
- Do you need to forgive one who has wronged you?
- Do you need to ask someone to forgive you?

If nothing comes to mind, thank him for his cleansing power. If the Lord reveals a specific sin:

- Write it down
- Confess your sin (*confess* means “to agree with”)
- Repent (turn from that sin)
- Receive God’s forgiveness
- With your pen, blot out any sin(s) you wrote on your paper
- On the same paper, write out this verse: “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from *all* unrighteousness.” (1 John 1:9, emphasis mine)

Just as you blotted out the sin on your paper, so God blots out your confessed sin with the precious blood of his Son Jesus. “I—yes, I alone—am the one who blots out your sins . . . and will never think of them again” (Isaiah 43:25, NLT). He no longer sees your sin! (Keep in mind, however, that if something comes to your remembrance that you have previously confessed, it is your enemy trying to defeat you.) Nineteenth-century evangelist D. L. Moody once said, “God casts our confessed sins into the depths of the sea, and He has even put up a ‘No Fishing’ sign over the spot.”

Continue praying:

Thank you, Lord, that you graciously point out my sin, provide a way for me to get rid of it, and then remember it no more. “For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more” (Jeremiah 31:34). Thank you that when you died on the cross you redeemed us so that we could be in relationship with you. “He does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities. . . . As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us.” (Psalm 103:10, 12).

7. After you have spent time in adoration and confession, thank the Lord for all he has done for you. Think of as many things as you can.

Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights. (James 1:17)

Try to extend your thanksgiving to include even some difficult things you may be experiencing.

Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. (1 Thessalonians 5:18)

8. Read Psalm 46:10.

Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth.

Jesus himself is asking you to live out this verse. It is not simply a request; it is a command. Meditate on the entire verse. What does it mean to you?

9. As you sit quietly in God's presence, ask him to bring rest to your soul.

Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. (Matthew 11:28)

He can help you relax as you give him your tension and the stressors of the day. Tell him or write out what is heavy on you.

10. Read a chapter from Proverbs. (You might read the chapter that corresponds to the day of the month. For instance, if it's the fifteenth, read chapter 15.) Next, read a psalm of your choice. As you read, ask the Holy Spirit to speak through those verses.

11. Pray:

Father, your Word says “do not fret” (Psalm 37:8), “do not be anxious about anything” (Philippians 4:6). I know, Lord Jesus, that worrying is taking on a responsibility you never intended for me to have. Help me to exchange my worries for your peace. Help me to trust you with these matters. Thank you that your Word says that nothing is too difficult for you. Nothing.

Read Philippians 4:6-8.

- Ask the Lord to reveal any worries that may be weighing you down.
- List your cares on paper.
- Next to your list, write the verse: “Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you” (1 Peter 5:7).
- Now picture the Cross.
- Visualize yourself dropping all those burdens at the foot of the Cross. Leave them there!
- We have a big God! He is *able!* God is *enough!*

12. Turn to Romans 12:9-21. As you read this passage, ask the Lord this question:

Father is there a word or phrase you want to whisper to my heart?

Take time to listen, then ask:

Father, is there anything you would like me to do with you that will make a difference for eternity?

Again, take time to listen.

13. If the Lord brings something to mind, write it down. He may prompt you to pray for someone. (Take time at this point to intercede for others.) The Lord may lead you to write a note or to serve him in a certain way. He may or may not reveal a word at this time. Don't feel discouraged if you did not sense his voice. Listening takes time and practice. Just tell the Lord that you are seeking to listen and be obedient to his promptings.

14. End your time alone with God in prayer.

Abba Father, thank you for these quiet moments with you. Help me to learn to stay in loving attentiveness to you. Thank you that you are always attentive to me. I want to think about you more throughout my day. I want to draw closer to you. I desire to be still and know that you are God. Thank You, Father, for leading me beside quiet waters and restoring my soul (Psalm 23:2-3). In Jesus' name I pray, Amen.

Endnotes

- ¹ Chuck Smith and Tal Brooke, *Harvest* (Costa Mesa, Calif.: The Word for Today), 141.
- ² Kenneth Kinghorn, ed., *John Wesley on Christian Beliefs: The Standard Sermons in Modern English*, vol. 1, Sermons 1–20 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), 30.
- ³ Oswald Chambers, *If Ye Shall Ask* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Chosen Books, 1958), 24.
- ⁴ D. M. M'Intyre, *The Hidden Life of Prayer* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1979), 94.
- ⁵ See <<http://www.posword.org/articles/gordsd/prayer01.shtml>>.
- ⁶ James Houston, *The Transforming Power of Prayer* (Colorado Springs, Colo.: NavPress, 1996), 5.
- ⁷ Joni Eareckson Tada, *Diamonds in the Dust* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1993).
- ⁸ Wesley Duewel, *Touch the World through Prayer* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Francis Asbury Press, 1986), 16.

- ⁹ Corrie ten Boom, *The Hiding Place* (Ulrichsville, Ohio: Barbour Publishing, 1971), 154.
- ¹⁰ Randy Alcorn, *The Ishband Conspiracy* (Sisters, Ore.: Multnomah Publishers, Inc., 2001), 54.
- ¹¹ See <<http://www.laymanstraining.com/motivator4.html>>.
- ¹² Richard Foster, *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1992), 191.
- ¹³ Oswald Chambers, *Prayer: A Holy Occupation* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Discovery House Publishers, 1992), 8.
- ¹⁴ E. M. Bounds, *Purpose in Prayer* (1920; reprint, Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1986), 7–8.
- ¹⁵ Henry Blackaby, *Experiencing God* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994), 23.
- ¹⁶ Bill Hybels, *Too Busy Not to Pray* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 74.
- ¹⁷ Henry T. Blackaby and Claude V. King, *Experiencing God* (Nashville: LifeWay Press, 1990), 34.
- ¹⁸ George Müller, *The Autobiography of George Müller* (Springdale, Penn.: Whitaker House, 1984), 40.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid*, 188.
- ²⁰ Frank S. Mead, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Religious Quotations* (Westwood, N. J.: Revell, 1965), 344.
- ²¹ Mary Geegh, *God Guides* (Holland, Mich.: Missionary Press, 1991), 2–3.
- ²² John Ortberg, *The Life You've Always Wanted* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1997), 141.
- ²³ See <<http://www.lifebites.org/archive/archi143.asp>>.
- ²⁴ John Eldredge, *Waking the Dead: The Glory of a Heart Fully Alive* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2003), 95.
- ²⁵ Steve Harper, "The Power of One Life," *Asbury Herald* 113 (Spring/Summer 2003), 5.
- ²⁶ A. W. Tozer, *The Pursuit of God* (Camp Hill, Penn.: Christian Publications, Inc., 1993), 82–83.