

Prophetic Prayer

Walking with the God who talks



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By Lyndall Bywater

‘Those in whom the Spirit comes to live are God’s new temple. They are, individually and corporately, places where heaven and earth meet’
(N. T. Wright)

Our God is talkative. The Bible leaves us in no doubt that he is constantly communicating, and constantly seeking to bring us, his people, into his conversation. The only problem is that we often don’t know how to tune in. This book gives you some insights and activities to help you hear God’s voice, so that you can dive more deeply into the adventure of walking with him and making the world around you look a bit more like his Kingdom.

‘I remind you that there are churches so completely out of the hands of God that if the Holy Spirit withdrew from them, they wouldn’t find it out for many months’ (A. W. Tozer)

When Jesus left his disciples and returned to Heaven, he didn’t send a seven-step plan for growing the church; instead he sent his own Spirit as a companion to be present among them. The Book of Acts isn’t a blueprint for building church, it is a series of stories about people learning how to hear the Holy Spirit and follow his leading.

When churches learn to listen to the Spirit who walks in their midst, then they come alive. When churches start to act on what he says to them, then whole neighbourhoods start to come alive. Our prayer is that this booklet will help you and your corps to tune in to the voice of the Holy Spirit, and that, as you act on his words, you will find life springing up all around you.

The 24-7/SA Prayer Network Team

Introduction

What is Christian faith like for you? Is it a set of beliefs, or is it an adventure? Is it a philosophy or is it a journey? Is it the theoretical concept of a God, or is it a continual walk in his company?

If you were in any doubt about what kind of relationship God always wanted to have with his creation, then you only need pick up your Bible and read as far as Genesis chapter 3. The writer paints a beautiful tableau of the God of the universe fashioning man and woman, and breathing life into them. Then the scene shifts and we get a glimpse of his first interactions with them: not teaching sessions or worship services, but a walk in the garden. Some time later, when the bliss and perfection of that innocent relationship is shattered by sin, the tableau shifts again, and this time we glimpse the heartbreak of a loving Creator walking alone, while his beloved are hiding from him (Genesis 3:8-10). Suddenly, communication is stilted, and separateness and distance become the hallmarks of man's interaction with his maker.

The rest of the Bible goes on to tell the story of God's tireless attempts to set the human race free to reconnect with him – to rediscover that walking-together relationship he longs for. He sends messengers, prophets, sages, poets, miracle-workers and kings, but his people eventually reject them all. In the end he arrives in person, in the shape of a man named Jesus. And what is the first thing this Jesus does, as he embarks on his new ministry? He goes for a walk by the seaside, and finds himself some walking companions to accompany him on his journey (Mark 1:16-20).

When that remarkable three-year ministry comes to an end, and God inaugurates a new era in his interactions with mankind, what does he promise? He promises to send them a comforter and helper... his own Spirit as a companion to walk with them through life (John 14:16-17).

We all need a solid set of beliefs, and an inspiring philosophy to undergird our faith; but if that's all Christianity is for you, then you may be missing out on the most important and exciting part. God wants to walk with you.

Walks with God have a habit of ending up in some very interesting places. Abraham founded a nation, David killed a giant, Solomon built a temple, Daniel survived a lions' den; Elisha raised a dead boy, Ezekiel lay on his side for 390 days, Matthew changed profession, Philip got relocated to the middle of a desert; people got healed, children got hugged, crowds were fed and lives were turned around. When God's people believe in him, they stand for something; when God's people walk with him, they have a transforming impact on the world around them.

The disciples were no meek and mild walking companions. As they pounded up and down the dusty roads of Galilee with Jesus, they were often to be found arguing with each other and badgering him with questions. If he had been looking for a bunch of reverent acolytes to file silently behind him, then he had picked the wrong crowd. But he wasn't looking for that... and he still isn't. He is still looking for friends (John 15:15), companions who will walk with him, chatting and listening all the way. He is looking for fellow-adventurers who will be game for whatever world-changing encounter he wants to lead them into. After all these centuries, after all the sin, pain and sacrifice, his heart hasn't changed from what it was in the Garden of Eden; he is still looking for people who will walk and talk with him.

The trouble with us humans is that we so often think too little of ourselves. We can hardly believe that the God we love so deeply would ever love us enough to want to saunter through life with us. So we fall into thinking of God in ways that fit better with our low view of ourselves. Do any of these ring a bell with you?

“I think of God as my boss. Each morning he has a to-do list for me to complete that day. My job is to go away and do what he’s asked, to the best of my ability. Then I come back to his office to give account of myself and to pick up the next list of tasks.”

“I think of God as a busy project manager with a whole world to look after. The way I serve him best is to get on with life the best I can, and only bother him if I really need to.”

“I think of God as a bad-tempered king who has exactingly high standards and is very hard to please. I do my best for him, but I’m not sure if I’m hitting the mark.”

“I think of God as a powerful but disinterested managing director. He doesn’t really mind what I do from day to day, so long as I don’t mess up too badly or bring his firm into disrepute.”

These are just a few examples of the mindsets we inadvertently adopt in our relationship with God, and it's a worthwhile exercise to explore whether any of them have crept into your thinking. The truth could not be more different. God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – longs to live in community with you. The Spirit of God is your walking companion, and you are his. Jesus put it like this:

'I will talk to the Father, and he'll provide you another Friend so that you will always have someone with you. This Friend is the Spirit of Truth. The godless world can't take him in because it doesn't have eyes to see him, doesn't know what to look for. But you know him already because he has been staying with you, and will even be in you!' (John 14:15-17, *The Message*).

This invitation to keep company with God's Spirit should, of course, come with a health warning. If you are hoping to have him along as a fixer, someone to make your plans successful and get you out of trouble, then you will be disappointed. God's Spirit is on a mission in our world, and walking with him means joining in. He may lead you to places you've never been to before; he may ask you to pass a message on to someone from him; he may use you and your talents to bring healing; he may empower you to move a mountain of injustice. The walk may involve a lot of inconvenience, but it will be the adventure of a lifetime.

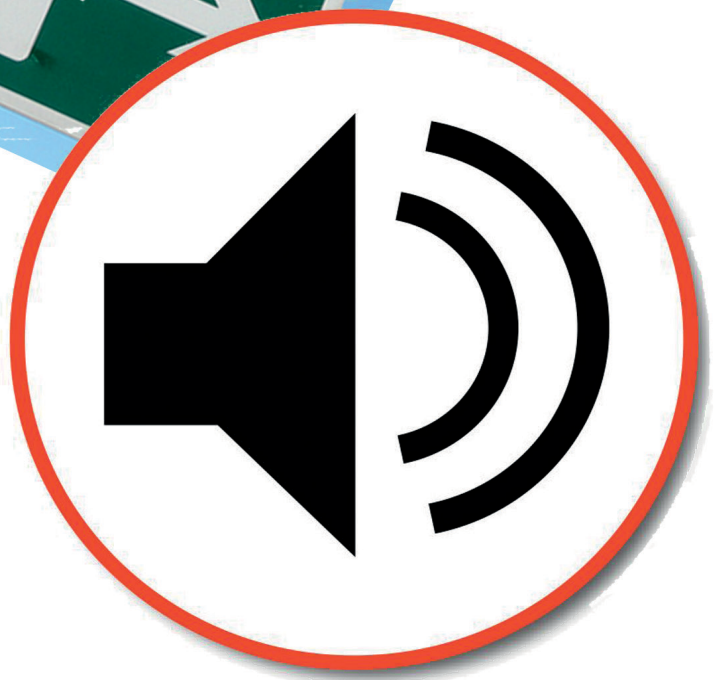
This booklet is designed to help you explore that adventure. We look at the lives of some of those in the Bible who knew what it was like to have a 'walking-together' relationship with God, to see what we can learn from their experiences.

Before the time of Jesus' ministry on earth, most of God's people had no expectation of having a 'personal' relationship with God. Only a few of the most holy men and women had that everyday, 'walking-together' relationship with him, and they were known as prophets. The community of Israel relied on them to walk and talk with Yahweh, and then to report back on what he was saying. The prophets were, if you like, the ones who led the people on the adventure of following their God.

The remarkable and thrilling promise which the prophet Joel announced (Joel 2:28-30), and which was fulfilled at Pentecost (Acts 2:1-4), is that all of God's people will get access to that same Spirit-filled walking-and-talking relationship with their maker. What used to be the preserve of the prophets is now available to every one of us. We no longer need a special category of people, known as prophets, to lead us on the adventure, but it is perhaps in deference to them that we still talk about this walking-together adventure as a 'prophetic lifestyle'. We read about how they heard God's voice and knew what he wanted to do among his people; we look at the way their lives intersected with their world and brought change, and we want that same transforming power to work through our lives.

As you read this booklet, work through the activities and share your discoveries with others, our prayer is that you, like the prophets of old, will discover the peace, joy and adventure that comes from walking with your God, and that your walk with him will leave its mark on the world around you.





Section One:

Samuel – Recognising God’s voice

1 Samuel 3:1-10; 16:1-13

Do you have any ‘it’s me’ people in your life? ‘It’s me’ people are the ones whose voices you can recognise straight away, even when all you’ve heard them say is:

‘Hello! It’s me!’

Most of us know at least one person whose voice we would instantly recognise, and yet many of us would say we don’t find it easy to hear and recognise the voice of the God we love and serve. In fact, we often feel that we fail when it comes to listening to him and discerning what he’s saying. The good news, at the start of this adventure, is that the God who walks with us does not want to be a silent companion. He fully intends you to hear him clearly, and to recognise him as easily as you recognise your nearest and dearest.

1. Noticing when God is getting our attention

In this first section of our prophetic prayer journey, we meet the prophet Samuel, and in the first of these two stories we find him undergoing an ‘it’s me’ lesson with God.

Samuel would go on to become a wise and renowned prophet in Israel, and a man much trusted for his ability to hear from God. But in this story in 1 Samuel 3, he is still a boy, having his beginner’s lesson in recognising God’s voice. It’s easy to assume that prophets could all hear God with perfect clarity from day one, but when Samuel first heard God’s voice, he didn’t even know who it was. God knew that, in years to come, he would require Samuel to receive and pass on many complex messages to the people of Israel, but none of that could happen if he didn’t first learn to recognise his voice.

We tend to set the bar very high for ourselves, thinking that we should immediately be able to hear God speaking long, complex messages to us, but like Samuel we need to start with the basics. Before we dive into complex conversations with our walking companion, we first need to be able to recognise when he's trying to get our attention.

The first thing Samuel learnt was what it sounded like when God spoke his name. The story gives the impression that he heard an audible voice calling him, and this can immediately make us feel inadequate; we've never heard that voice so we must be doing something wrong! In truth, relatively few people say they hear God's voice audibly, but that's not because we're all failing. It's because God simply isn't restricted to words and soundwaves. He has every dimension of reality available to him, and he can 'speak' your name to you in a thousand different ways. He can whisper it into your ears, auto-cue it into your mind, sing it into your heart or write it in letters of fire in the sky above your head. Just because you don't hear it in the way you hear your human friends, don't be fooled into thinking you're deaf or he's ignoring you. Instead, broaden your horizons.

The adventure for each one of us is to learn to notice when God is getting our attention... when he is calling us by name. As you pray this week, why not ask him to help you. Then, as you go about your day, keep alert for those moments when he catches your attention. Perhaps it will be a nudge in your thoughts, or a sight that catches your eye. Perhaps it will be a sudden sense of his presence, or a phrase you hear someone say. Whatever it is, don't write it off as 'just one of those things'. It is highly likely to be God calling your name. So, wherever you are and whatever you're doing, take a moment to answer him:

'Here I am, Lord. I'm listening.'

Then stay alert for what he might want to show you or say to you. In these early days of your Samuel lesson, you'll probably find God doesn't immediately download a world-changing message to your brain. In fact, it may seem as if he's got nothing to say at all. That's OK: this is practice at noticing and recognising his voice. Just enjoy the pleasure of that moment connecting with him.

2. Sensing God's yes/no nudge

The story in 1 Samuel 16 provides us with another useful lesson in learning to recognise God's voice. Many years have passed, and God has instructed Samuel to anoint Israel's second king. He knows which family the king will come from, but has no idea which son it will be. As Jesse, head of the family, parades his beloved sons before the prophet, we get a glimpse of Samuel's very simple discernment process, and it is a kind of 'thumbs up, thumbs down' conversation with God. For each son that passes, Samuel senses the 'no' from God, until David comes in, and the heavenly 'yes' is resounding.

How familiar are you with God's thumbs up/thumbs down response? When we learn a foreign language, the first words we usually pick up are 'yes' and 'no'. We start there because these are among the simplest concepts to communicate. The same principle is true in our communications with God. Long before we learn to hear complex speeches from him, we need to get familiar with his negative and his affirmative. As you make choices this week, listen out for the opinion of Heaven. You're no robot, so God won't have an opinion on every decision you make, but listen out for those moments when he does. Don't worry about trying to get an explanation from him – just practise noting and obeying his 'yes' and his 'no'.

In all the listening you do, remember that the God you listen to is the God who loves you. Whether he's saying 'yes' or 'no', or just calling your name to get your attention, he is speaking to you in love. If the voice you hear sounds accusing or oppressive, simply take it to God in prayer and ask him to open your ears to the beautiful resonance of his love.

Activities for practising recognising God's voice

Practise the art of being stoppable:

No matter how busy or preoccupied you become this week, make a point of stopping whenever something catches your attention.

- Stop when you see or hear something beautiful, shocking or unusual.
- Stop when you read a verse of Scripture which 'jumps out' at you.
- Stop when you feel particularly moved by something.
- Stop when you encounter an unexpected event.

As soon as your attention is caught, stop in your tracks (literally, if possible), and consciously remember that God walks with you every moment of every day. Thank him for his presence, and invite him to speak to you. Whether you hear anything further or not, the stopping is a moment of worship.

Practise the art of hearing your name:

In the Bible, when God calls someone's name, he often adds a term of affection: for instance, Mary was 'highly favoured' (Luke 1:28), Daniel was 'highly esteemed' (Daniel 10:11), Gideon was 'mighty warrior' (Judges 6:12). The name God calls us by is always infused with his love for us. Why not ask God to tell you the name he calls you by. It may be connected to your actual name, or it may be something completely different, but it will be meaningful and loving. Remember, God speaks in many different ways, so keep your mind, heart, ears and eyes open, and let him tell you in his own time. Here are some ideas to get you listening:

- Find out what your given name means.
- Is there a particular word or phrase God often uses when speaking to you?

Is that connected with his name for you?

- Is there a characteristic others often admire in you?

There's nothing magical or mystical about this, and there are no right answers. It's simply about practising hearing God's words of affirmation over you. He may use different names during different seasons of your life, but the name will always be a reflection of the deep affection he has for you, and as such it will be a precious gift every time you hear it.

When you've got an idea of what name he wants to call you by, remember to look and listen out for it as you go about your daily life.

Practising sensing the nudge:

Invite God into your dilemmas this week. When you come across a decision you need to make, choose the option you think best, then stop for a moment and invite God to 'nudge' you – to give you a sense of his 'yes' or his 'no'. Remember, he may not have an opinion either way, so don't be discouraged if you don't sense anything, but making the space for him to speak is an important act of trust and surrender.

Group activity

Read a Bible passage out loud to the group, and invite each person to notice and write down one word or phrase which particularly stands out to them.

Read the passage through twice to give everyone chance to hear God. When you've finished the reading, ask each person to share the word or phrase they wrote down.



Section Two:

Zechariah – Communication beyond words

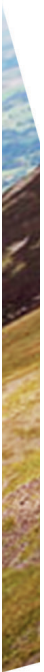
Zechariah 3:1-10; 4:1-14

Bad days come to us all – even the rich, famous and successful. Fred Astaire was once told by an MGM testing director that he couldn't sing, couldn't act, and could only dance 'a little'. Steve Jobs, creator of such 21st-century icons as the iPod and the iPad, actually got fired from Apple a few years after launching the company. And Walt Disney, that mine of quiriness which eventually brought forth Mickey Mouse and his friends, was fired by a newspaper editor early in his career because he 'lacked imagination and had no good ideas'.

There is colour, humour and beauty in our world which wouldn't be there if those men had taken no for an answer. But they kept looking for ways to share their creativity, and eventually their talents were acknowledged.

One of the most unfortunate trends in Christian history has been to dismiss the enjoyment of art and creativity as 'secular' pastimes with little to offer in the way of spiritual enrichment. Yet beauty and imagination not only enhance our lives, they also show us God. How often has a painting, a piece of music or a powerful story communicated the truths of God to you in a way that no water-tight philosophical argument ever could? It shouldn't surprise us really, since the God we serve is the Creator of all things. Why would he not want to use the full breadth of his created realm to communicate with us?

Zechariah was a prophet who encountered a truly creative side to God's communication style. He lived at a time when the people of Israel were rebuilding their temple, after a long season in captivity. The renovations had hit some roadblocks, and God commissioned Zechariah and Haggai to speak to the people and their leaders on his behalf, to get the work moving again. Haggai seems to have heard God's words and passed them on in a rather conventional way, but nothing was quite that simple for Zechariah. Instead of statements he got questions; instead of explanations he got surreal visions; instead of a sermon he got a 3D multi-media experience. There were some words in the midst of it all, but the messages were threaded through the images and the atmosphere of those visions, as much as through the verbal messages that accompanied them.



Do you remember that rather confusing song about a rainbow which included the line:

‘Listen with your eyes, listen with your eyes, sing everything you see.’

Zechariah’s prophetic experience could be summed up as listening with his eyes. God had things to tell Israel through him, but he intended to use the full breadth of Zechariah’s senses and imagination. The visions seem to shift between what Zechariah might actually have been seeing with his physical eyes (building works, olive groves, etc) and what he was seeing with the eyes of his imagination (angels, pure gold lampstands etc). By the creative Spirit of God, it was all woven together into a tapestry of challenge and encouragement for its intended audience.

Have you developed the habit of listening with your eyes... or your nose, your hands or your taste-buds, for that matter? Do you expect God to ‘speak’ in colours, fragrances and symphonies, as much as in words? Having learnt to recognise when God is getting your attention, the next challenge is to fling wide your expectations, so that you can hear him with all your senses, and even your imagination.

There is one particular phrase which God asks Zechariah several times during their conversation:

‘What do you see?’

In fact, you will find many of the other prophets in the Bible being asked the same question. It’s as though God is challenging them to switch on all their senses, to take in the full dimensions of what he is showing them. Suddenly, the prophetic revelation isn’t just a download session, where God speaks and the prophet listens; it becomes a conversation, where the prophet looks around, explores the scene and seeks to understand, while God paints the shapes and shades which will communicate what he wants to say.

As you walk with God this week, why not listen out for that age-old question: ‘What do you see?’ After all, it’s a very relevant question for a walking companion to ask you. Then open your eyes:

Open your physical eyes – and the rest of your senses, for that matter – and take in the world around you. What do you notice? What does the Spirit draw you towards? What is the God-truth which your surroundings seem to be communicating to you?

Open the eyes of your imagination. Just as he did with Zechariah, God may put pictures in your mind; he may show you visions while you’re awake, or give you dreams in your sleep. Your pictures and visions may include bus-drivers and postboxes rather than angels and lampstands... God can speak through anything. Just go with the flow and see where he takes your mind’s eye.

Just as Zechariah did, remember to have a conversation with God about the things you see. That’s where understanding and revelation will come from.

We have a tendency to worry about whether this kind of ‘hearing’ is really safe. Won’t our minds lead us astray? If you’re reading your Bible regularly and spending time in God’s presence, then you will learn to distinguish what God’s language sounds like. If your senses or your imagination seem to be taking you somewhere that feels foreign to the heart and character of God, then simply invite him to refocus you. Read some Scripture, pray for clarity, and then look again. Like every kind of communication with God, this takes practice. The more you do it, the more fluent you become.

And one more thing: once you begin to ‘hear’ God in truly creative ways, don’t be surprised if he asks you to use your own creative talents to pass on messages to others. Perhaps your painting, your home-baked cake or your act of kindness will feature in the multi-media vision God is showing someone else.

Activities for practising communication beyond words

Practise the art of listening with all your senses:

The Bible makes it clear that God is always communicating, constantly seeking the connection of conversation with his creation. One of the reasons we find it hard to hear him is that we think the best way to tune in to his voice is to empty our minds and wait for him to drop his words in. Yet this approach tends just to leave us confused. If your inner world is silent, the best thing to do is to open your senses to what's around you. God is speaking volumes through the natural world he made (Psalm 19:1-6).

- What do you see and hear? What do those sights and sounds tell you about who God is?
- As you look around, ask God to show you what delights him and what pains him.
- Ask God to direct your attention to one specific thing in the landscape or soundscape around you. What is he saying to you through it?

Practise the art of imaginative listening:

Find a story in one of the Gospels where Jesus meets someone and changes their life (Luke 8, for instance, has several to choose from). As you read the story through slowly, put yourself in the place of that person meeting Jesus:

- What is the physical environment like (sights, smells, sounds, crowds etc)?
- How do you feel as you approach Jesus?
- What do you want from him?
- How does it feel when he speaks to you?
- What is it like when his power starts working in you?

Ask God to speak to you about your own life, as you use your imagination to explore the story.

Practise the art of wordless encouragement:

Who are you praying for at the moment? Ask God to give you a wordless encouragement for them. Words are powerful, but visual aids often impact us more deeply. Instead of asking God for a word of encouragement for that person, ask him to show you something (a picture, an object etc) which sums up how he wants to encourage them, then find a way to share it with them:

- Give them a picture of what God showed you: take a photo, draw it yourself, or find it on the internet and send it to them.
- Get hold of the object God showed you (if possible), and give it to them.
- Act it out: do something practical for them which expresses the image God showed you.
- Use your own creative talents to draw/make the image/object which God showed you.

Group activity:

Give each person a piece of A4 paper, and ask the group to break into pairs.


Invite each person to take a few moments to ask God how he wants to bless and encourage the person they're paired with. Then ask them to find a way to draw or make something which expresses that blessing, using their piece of paper.

After five minutes, invite pairs to give each other their creation, and to explain what it means.



Section Three:

Daniel – fully tuned in Daniel 9:1-19; 6:1-28



Our brief encounters with Samuel and Zechariah have given us a good starting-place for tuning in to communication with God. We've explored what it's like when he catches our attention, or when he points out significant things he wants us to notice along the way. To use another metaphor, we've started to catch the notes of God's melody – to recognise his signature tune in our lives – but if we stop there, we'll never be able to hear the deeper, more complex things he wants to say to us. It's time to listen to the symphony, with all its moods and variations.

Daniel lived in a foreign culture. It wasn't just a bit different to Israel, it was utterly alien. What's more, Daniel's own culture was considered primitive and backward. In Babylonian society, to be a believer in the God of Israel was to be deluded – to be someone who lived in fairy tales. The Babylonian authorities worked regularly and ruthlessly to purge their empire of this ridiculous belief in one all-supreme God. And Daniel lived and worked right in the heart of it all.

To extend our music analogy a bit further, living for Yahweh in the midst of Babylon was like trying to listen to Mozart's Requiem in the middle of a heavy metal concert. Even in our own much more Christianised society, we can relate to the feeling of confusion and bewilderment as we try to hear the strains of God's song over the hubbub of consumerism and humanism. It can be hard to know what God is saying when so much around us tells us that we're mad to even believe in him, let alone let him direct our lives.

Some Christians have dealt with the problem by donning the social equivalent of those noise-excluding headphones, cutting themselves off from anything which seems to be playing the wrong tune. But two thousand years of Church history have taught us that societies only change when people of change live wholeheartedly in the midst of them, just as Daniel was doing.

So how did Daniel stay tuned to his God amid the cacophony?

The simple answer is discipline. Daniel established some holy habits which helped him keep the sound of God's symphony in his ears, even while the world around him was playing a completely different tune. It's as though he knew that he wouldn't be able to rely on the things and people around him to help him hear his God, so he established spaces in his daily life where he could deliberately shut out life and tune in. He guarded those spaces, no matter what was going on around him, and in Daniel 6 we discover that it very nearly cost him his life.

1. Tuning in through the Scriptures

In Chapter 9, we find Daniel deep in the Scriptures. Of course, the Scriptures in Daniel's day were somewhat different from the Bible we know today, since most of what we now have at our disposal wasn't even written then. But the Israelites had developed the habit of writing down their own story, as well as God's messages to them, and Daniel had developed the habit of studying them. To this man in modern, progressive Babylon, they must at times have seemed old and irrelevant, dry and over-familiar, but that didn't stop him. It's the stories of God that remind us of who he is; it's the words of God, even the ones spoken centuries ago, that remind us what he sounds like. Daniel read and studied so that he would know his God more fully. In going over and over the old texts, he became so familiar with the sound of God's voice that he would recognise it in an instant, were God ever to speak to him in person.

It is said that an expert in Bach's music would be able to tell if a newly-discovered work was written by him or not, because they would be intimately acquainted with every aspect of his style and technique. God longs to speak with you today; he has no intention of walking at your side in mysterious, impenetrable silence (well, not much of the time anyway), but he needs you to become an expert in him. It doesn't require a high IQ or anything like that, it just requires time spent reading and rereading his word. Don't worry if it all seems a million miles from what you're living today. Read it anyway, because it will help you get to know God in all his many tones and cadences.

2. Tuning in through prayer

We read in Daniel 6 that the other discipline this prophet insisted on was time in prayer. Like many of us, he probably kept up an internal dialogue with God throughout his day, acknowledging him in thanksgiving and calling on him for help when he needed it, but that wasn't enough. He needed a space – a physical space, and a space in time – when he could stop and focus on Yahweh. There were many good spiritual reasons for this of course, but there were a few practical ones too.

The traditional form of Hebrew prayer was to speak out loud. A typical prayer time would involve the reciting of certain formal prayers which were found in the Scriptures and which dated from Israel's journey through the wilderness and their arrival in the Promised Land. Again, these were ancient, traditional, deeply familiar prayers, but Daniel took time every day to speak them out.

If you've ever tried to learn a song, you'll know that the best way to do it is to sing along. Daniel would tune into God's song by reading the Scriptures, then he would sing along to it by reciting the old prayers.

Daniel's diligence paid off in many ways. His faith – that fairy-tale nonsense the Babylonians so ridiculed – proved true and astonishingly powerful, and he became one of the most trusted men in all that confused, idolatrous society. And when it was time to bring the Hebrew people home, who did God speak to? He spoke to the man who would recognise his voice and who was listening out for the next line of his song.

Activities for practising tuning in

Practise studying God through his word:

The Bible is our handbook on God. Through stories and legends, poetry and letters, it weaves a complex yet beautiful tapestry depicting who God is. Not all of it is easy to understand, or easy to stomach, but all of it is important if we're to know our God more deeply.

This week, practise the art of studying. Each day, read a passage of Scripture, then write down all the characteristics of God you can find in it: Who does it tell you he is? What is he like? What does he do? Why does he do it? Ask the Holy Spirit to open your eyes to see things you've never seen before.

Practise finding the 'rema' word:

New Testament Greek uses two words for God's word: logos and rema. Logos is the Word of God in its entirety – the eternal, unchanging truth, spoken by God into his world. Rema is the 'now' word – the word which is most relevant for this moment. For instance, it is always true that God is faithful, but sometimes God speaks that promise to us in a fresh, clear, unmistakable way because our circumstances mean we particularly need to hear it.

Open your Bible to one of the following psalms: 18, 23, 63, 103 or 145. Before you begin reading, ask the Holy Spirit to pick out God's rema word for you from among the many logos truths in these psalms.

Start reading slowly through the passage, until one particular word or phrase catches your attention. Then stop reading (don't feel you have to finish the passage.)

Take ten minutes or so to savour that word or phrase. You can either do this in your inner world – analysing it with your mind or weighing it with your heart; or you can do it in your outer world – writing about it, drawing it, researching it.

At the end of your reflection time, seek to answer the following questions:

- Why is God speaking this rema word to me now?
- What does he want me to know about him from this word?
- What does he want me to do/change in my life, as a result of hearing this word?

Practise shining the word on the words:

What have you been wrestling with lately? Have you been criticised by someone, do you find yourself in an impossible situation, or is there a controversial issue you're trying to grapple with?

Take time to study the word, to find out what it has to say about the things which are troubling you. Search the Bible itself, but remember also to use concordances, research tools and other Christian books to help you understand what the Bible says.

Group activity

Choose a theme you want to explore as a group, then search the Bible to find several passages on that theme. Split the group into several smaller groups, each taking one passage to study together. After 20 minutes or so, gather everyone together again and ask each group to share what they have learnt about the theme from their passage.



Section Four:

Elisha – Godly risk-taking

2 Kings 4:1-7; 5:1-14

In recent years, an activity known as ‘treasure-hunting’ has become increasingly popular in the Church in the UK. It’s a very simple and powerfully effective way to help people to connect with the reality of a God who is alive and active, and who loves them enough to want to talk to them. ‘Treasure-hunting’ is about going out and praying with people on the streets of your local community, but it starts with a prayer-time in which each person asks God to tell them something about a person they are going to meet. It may be something as simple as him telling them to look out for someone in a red top who they need to pray with, or it may be that he gives them a specific word of encouragement to share with someone. It’s a nerve-racking business, but there is nothing like the joy of watching people grasp the undeniable reality that God cares for them enough to tell one of his friends to go and find them.

We have seen so many different evangelism strategies emerge over the years, but something like ‘treasure-hunting’ is an excellent reminder that God is the best evangelist there is. If we will help those around us to hear what he is trying to say to them, then they will often come to faith in him very quickly. And it shouldn’t surprise us; if he is the God who walks and talks with us, why wouldn’t he want to walk and talk with those who don’t yet know him?

In this section we meet the prophet Elisha, and we find him engaged in some excitingly miraculous stuff. Elisha lived a little while after Samuel, and by the time he took up his ministry, Israel had got thoroughly used to having a king. In Samuel’s day, prophets were the leaders of society, but by Elijah’s and Elisha’s time they were outsiders, often seen as a dangerous influence on the people. These two men regularly spoke uncomfortable truths to the powerful, yet their lives were also shot through with utterly miraculous events. They saw food multiply, they raised the dead and they helped their leaders win battles. We read of no other prophets who had such miracle-filled lives.

Perhaps God knew that his people were beginning to depend too heavily on human structures and solutions, now that they had a monarchy and the trappings of government. Did God send them these miracle-working men simply to remind them that he was still in charge?

If so, then the implications for us 21st-century followers of Jesus are immense. Here in the West, we live in a culture which is even more self-reliant and God-denying than Elijah's and Elisha's Israel. Our society badly needs to know that God is still on the throne and still reaching out to his creation, and miracles, signs and wonders may just be one of the best ways to demonstrate that truth.

Are you ready to help God speak through miracles? It's a risky business, but it had a powerful impact on Elisha's society, and God hasn't changed.

1. Real need

Do you ever find yourself thinking how convenient it would be if God would just do a nice little miracle for such-and-such a person, because then they'd be more likely to believe in him? Convenient though miracles can be for convincing the sceptics, God isn't in the business of showmanship. He saves his interventions for those places where he is invited out of real need. In this section we read the stories of two people who were in desperate need. In fact, they were desperate enough to come looking for a miracle.

God longs to make himself known, but he also waits to be invited. As you walk and talk with God this week, ask him to show you which of your friends are reaching that point of desperate need, where they might willingly let you pray with them for a miracle.

2. Accurate obedience

The stories of the impoverished widow and the leprous soldier, Naaman, don't actually tell us how Elisha heard from God... and more's the pity, because the instructions he was told to give them were strange indeed! In both cases, the actions they were told to take were illogical at best and down-right dangerous at worst.

Pouring oil from one container into another always leaves you with less oil available than you had in the first place, because of the way it coats the sides of the jar. Dipping in a muddy river when you have leprosy is somewhat contrary to wise health advice. But God knew what he was doing, and Elisha must have known that the only way miracles happen is if we stick to the maker's instructions.

As you pray for people in urgent need of a miracle, don't be too surprised if God suddenly asks you to say something unexpected or illogical to them. In practising accurate, unquestioning obedience by passing it on, you may just be helping them take another step towards the transforming work God wants to do in their lives.

3. Leave the rest to God

It's interesting to note that Elisha didn't see either of the miracles in these stories take place. Perhaps he was tempted to follow the widow back into her house to make sure the oil multiplied, or to go with Naaman down to the river to make sure he got healed, but he didn't. Having done his part, he left the resolution up to God.

Godly risk-taking is never about making spectacular things happen. It's always about opening the way for God to do spectacular things. Once God has pointed you towards someone who is genuinely ready and longing for a miracle, and once you have heard his word for them and passed it on, then it's time to step back and let him work.

Our walk with God isn't an exclusive affair. He is the friend who longs to be introduced to all those we meet along our way, especially those who are most in need of his help.

Activities for practising Godly risk-taking

Practise being unashamed:

Do you go through life keeping your relationship with God in the background so as not to make people uncomfortable? Of course, sensitivity is a good thing, but do you give God permission to butt into your conversations with people? If he metaphorically taps you on the shoulder and asks you to mention his name to them, or to pray with them, do you do it, or do you politely ask him to keep quiet?

As you talk with people this week, listen out for God's Spirit letting you know that he wants to get involved. Take a risk:

- Encourage them by telling them something of who God is and how much he loves them.
- Ask if you can pray with them. If they are uncomfortable with that, simply assure them you'll be praying for them.
- Ask God to prompt you if there is something practical he wants you to do to help them.

Practising the art of hearing the unexpected:

It takes practise to be able to hear God saying the unexpected, and to be sure we've heard it right. When we hear God say something logical, which seems to fit perfectly to the situation we're praying about, then we get a sense of 'rightness' about it, but that sense is often absent when God says something which seems illogical or ill-fitting.

When you start out, you're unlikely to be giving out instructions like the ones Elisha was giving. You're more likely to start with simple encouragements. As you pray for someone, ask God to give you a word to encourage them – something which will make sense to them even if it doesn't to you.

Remember that we all hear differently; the word may come as a thought in your head, a feeling in your heart, an object you catch sight of or a sentence you read. How it comes doesn't matter. All that matters is that you pass it on exactly as you received it, without trying to understand or interpret it. Then leave the rest up to God.

You may get it wrong, but that's all a part of what practice is about. So long as your word was encouraging, it will do no harm, but the recipient will be blessed that you cared enough to pray and listen to God for them.

Practise making space for detours:

Elijah and Elisha both allowed God to hijack their plans and take them on prophetic detours. Our diaries are often so full that we don't have time to add anything else in, so we don't give God too much free rein to interrupt us or redirect us. This week, build in some gaps in your diary, and invite God to steer you to a place or person you wouldn't normally have time to visit. Then see what he does.

Group activity

Consider doing some "treasure-hunting" with your group.

You can find a helpful 'How to' guide by visiting www.forever2012.com clicking on 'Pray!', then clicking on 'Resources', and then clicking on the 'Helpful things to download' link. There you will find a download called 'Treasure-hunting Prayer'.

Alternatively you can purchase Kevin Dedmon's book on Treasure-hunting (details in the Further Reading section).



Section Five:

John the Baptist – Confronting injustice

Matthew 3:1-12; Luke 3:10-20

The protest movement known as ‘Occupy’ hit the headlines in 2010 when a number of its members quite literally took up residence right in front of St Paul’s Cathedral in London. They stayed for many weeks, and gave the church authorities some headaches in the process, yet they had never intended to end up there. The issues they wanted to highlight were about wealth, poverty and the injustice of certain banking practices, so their original campsite of choice was the London Stock Exchange. But at the last minute they found they couldn’t set up camp there, so opted for St Paul’s as second best.

No doubt the staff and clergy of St Paul’s sometimes wished they’d never had to get involved, but many commentators made the point that perhaps a church was exactly the right place for such a protest. After all, shouldn’t the Church play its part in confronting injustice? One small relocation, and suddenly the Church had to have an opinion on wealth, poverty and banking, rather than standing by in silence.

It’s our hope and prayer that you’ve enjoyed this adventure of walking with God and hearing his voice. He is goodness itself, so walking with him is walking with goodness itself. Yet at some point we all need to learn to hear his grief, as well as his joy. The walk will take us through harsh landscapes, and we can’t simply close our eyes and ears till we get out the other side. We need to let him show us brutal realities which offend him; we need to tune our ears to the sound of his pain and anger; we need to be prepared to pass on his correction as well as his encouragement.

John the Baptist should have had the most enjoyable job in the world. His was the task of telling the Jewish people that their Messiah had at last arrived. Centuries of waiting, praying and longing were over. Surely his job should have been one long party, shouldn't it? One look at the stories of his ministry are enough to tell us it wasn't like that. John had caught sight of this Messiah; they were related, so must have met as children, and John had begun to see reflections of God himself in this carpenter cousin of his. The reflections he saw must have brought him joy, but they also showed up the stains and rottenness in the society around him. True goodness always shows up fake or half-hearted goodness for what it is. John knew that if Jesus was to receive the welcome and honour he deserved, then behaviours would have to change.

Jesus still needs prophets who will brave the world on his behalf and draw attention to attitudes and behaviours which are wrong. He doesn't just need them in the political arena, he also needs them on your street, in your workplace and even in your church. What can we learn from John the Baptist about how to confront injustice?

1. Know your cause

John's basic message was repentance – the kind that means you really change your life – but it's interesting to note that, when asked for specific suggestions for what people should do to change, all of his examples are about money, possessions and generosity (Luke 3:11-14). He could doubtless have listed hundreds of issues which his audience needed to repent of, but he seems to have stuck with just a few.

We don't help the cause of the Kingdom if we try to confront every wrong we see. John was a prophet, so we can assume he listened to God, to know what to speak out against. We need to do likewise. Confronting injustice must start with God showing us which injustice he wants us to confront.

2. Living it

John cut a strange figure, wandering the desert dressed in his first-century camel-hair coat and snacking on locusts and honey (Matthew 3:4). Was he just eccentric, or was there a more meaningful reason behind it all? We've just observed that John was stirred by the injustice of those who extorted and abused wealth. Perhaps this lifestyle was his way of living what he preached... choosing a life of poverty as a demonstration against the excesses of greed and consumerism.

To speak out against injustice without living out against it is hypocrisy. If you're going to tell others that something they're doing is wrong, then you have to commit to the journey of eradicating that wrong from your own life too. It's partly a matter of integrity – there must be consistency between our words and our actions – but it's also a matter of hope. People don't just need to hear about what's going wrong, they need to see that it's possible to live differently. Every cry against injustice should also be a demonstration of what goodness looks like.

3. Justice is Jesus

John wasn't just some disgruntled holy man roving the desert, peddling his own best ideas for building a healthy society; he was proclaiming the principles of the Kingdom. As members of God's family, we may have plenty of good ideas about what is wrong around us, and how the world should look, but our opinions aren't the same as God's voice. When we're asking God what we need to speak out against, we need to keep Jesus and his Kingdom firmly at the centre of our thinking. It's important to be brutally honest with ourselves: is the injustice we're seeing really an offence or obstacle to Christ and his Kingdom, or is it just something we don't like?

John was an outsider. His lifestyle and his message made him an uncomfortable person to have around. When it comes to confronting injustice, God often uses the outsiders, the eccentrics and those who don't fit in. Those on the edge can often see and speak with greater clarity than those who are established insiders. Let's keep our eyes and ears open to the 'misfits' we meet in the course of our walk with God. They may just be heralding the Kingdom.

Activities for practising confronting injustice

Practise the art of knowing when to speak and what to say:

1. Hearing the alarm

When God wants to draw our attention to something which is wrong or unjust, it's as though he sets off an alarm in us. That alarm is usually a strong emotion – shock, sadness or outrage – or a strong impulse to take action in some way. Though the urge to speak out against the injustice may be very powerful at this stage, feelings and impulses aren't the same as prophetic messages. So, when the alarm goes off, the first thing we do is pray, pray and pray.

2. Clarify the message

If God has sounded the alarm in you because he wants you to speak out, then he will have a specific, clear message for you to give. Praying helps calm your inner world, so that you can hear his voice and his words above the roar of your own emotions.

- Talk to him about how he feels about the situation. What grieves him? What does he want to see change?
- Dig into the Bible: no message from God will contradict anything in his word, so ask him to point you to Scripture passages which express what he's saying about this situation.
- Talk to others about what you're feeling, and what you're hearing from God. They may help bring clarity.
- When the message is clear, and you know exactly who it's for, write it down.

3. Test your motives

Strong emotions can mean mixed motives. A prophetic message should carry your heart, but not your hurts and fears. Be brutally honest with yourself as you ask these questions:

- Is there any resentment in me towards the person/people I'm giving this message to?
- Have I toned the message down at all out of fear?
- Am I speaking out purely in obedience to God, or is it partly to please/impress people?
- Is there any of my own agenda in the message? Would I feel angry or distressed if God told me not to pass it on after all?

4. Speak out and let go

When you're confident that your motives are as pure as possible, then it's time to speak. Always try to give a written copy of your message to the person it's for, so that they can take it away and weigh it.

Once you've spoken, your part as a prophetic messenger is over. Put the situation back into God's hands and walk away. It is his job to ensure that his word is heard and acted upon.

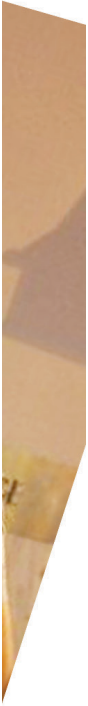
Group activity

In Old Testament times, God spoke to kings through individual prophets. Nowadays God's Spirit often stirs the hearts and consciences of our national leaders through the collective prophetic voice of a movement or campaign.

Is there an injustice about which several members of your group feel particularly strongly? Is there an organisation/movement which is speaking out about that issue? If so, how can you and your group add your voice to that prophetic call?



Section Six:



The Church – Hearing God together
Acts 4:24-31; Romans 12:10;
1 Corinthians 12:6; 14:1-33; Ephesians 4:11

Have you ever sat in a committee meeting and wished that the fire of God would fall? Perhaps, in your darkest moments, you've wished it would fall on some of your fellow committee members – but that's not really the point of the question. Have you ever sat there, looking at pieces of paper, listening to proposals, reading PowerPoint slides... and thought:

'This would be so much simpler if God just showed up in person and told us what to do!'

Hopefully by now you've discovered that God does indeed talk with you in a thousand ways as you walk with him; yet we struggle to believe that can be true for us as corps/churches too. When it comes to matters of guidance and decision-making in the Body of Christ, we assume that the divine dialogue is only expressed through discussions, votes and dull deliberations. Of course, those processes do have their place in helping us make wise plans, but have we perhaps lost the art of listening to God together as his Body?

The first of our readings for this section is a well-known and much-loved story in the book of Acts. It involves a meeting, some discussions, and an inspiring prayer. But the reason it is so popular is perhaps because it also involves a rather unmistakable intervention on the part of the Holy Spirit. When the place begins to shake, that's when you feel pretty sure God has joined the conversation!

Such tangible interventions are rare (perhaps out of compassion for our insurance companies), but God is no less passionate about the affairs of his Body, and no less keen to be in on our meetings. The real question is: how do we hear and include him?

1. Members who listen

Do you think of yourself as part of the picture, or just part of the frame? Sometimes we think of Church as a picture God has already painted. He's already decided what it's going to look like. Our job, like the frame of a painting, is just to be there to hold it up somehow.

In fact, it's more accurate to think of Church as a jigsaw puzzle. The picture is only complete when all the pieces are there, in their right places. The big picture is made up of lots of individual 'mini-pictures'. You are a piece of that jigsaw; the mini-picture of what God is doing and saying in your life is part of the big picture of what he's doing and saying in the part of his Body which you belong to. If your bit is missing, or you hide it because you think it's less important, then the whole picture is incomplete.

It is always easier for leaders to hear God's voice and discern his will for a corps if everyone is regularly sharing their stories of what God is doing and saying in their lives. You put a jigsaw together by looking at the individual pieces, as well as looking at the picture on the box. For instance, if 20 people tell stories of God leading them to live or work in a particular part of town, maybe God is speaking about doing some prayer or mission work there.

We don't all need to tell every detail of our lives to our leaders, but if we all make a habit of talking to each other and sharing tales of our walking-together relationship with God, then the jigsaw pieces can be seen, and the picture will emerge in time.

2. Making space for God to speak

Those committee meetings we talked about earlier are rather inevitable in the life of any organisation, but they don't have to be all talk. Why not 'agenda' time for prayer and listening to God? It may make the meeting longer, but it may also make it godlier.

Remember that not everyone listens to God in the same way, though. Some will hear best in silence; some through creativity; some in conversation with others; some through reading and reflecting. Give people permission to listen in the way that suits their personality. Then gather all the reflections and insights, and see if you can discern a picture emerging from the pieces.

3. Find the prophets

When the Holy Spirit came, the business of prophecy changed. Instead of only a few holy men and women being able to hear God's voice, that privilege was extended to everyone. Yet, though we should all 'prophesy' (hear God's word and pass it on to others), we're not all prophets. In the epistle readings for this section, Paul makes it clear that there's still a special assignment known as 'prophet', and a spiritual gift to go with it.

A prophet is someone who will prove unusually good at hearing and communicating messages from God which are particularly apt and accurate for other people, or for the congregation as a whole. To exercise the gift of prophecy in a congregation requires character and trust. For this reason, prophets tend to emerge rather than appear suddenly. As the whole corps practises the art of listening to God and sharing what they've heard, the prophets will emerge: those who regularly share things which seem to be relevant to a lot of people at once; those who seem to 'sum up' what most of us are sensing; those who seem to have an ability to give surprisingly accurate encouragements to others, without knowing anything of their circumstances. Prophets may not always be comfortable people to be around (think of John the Baptist), but if we're open to God's Spirit, then we will sense his affirmation when they speak what he's given them to say.

We don't need to fear this becoming an abuse of power; even when a prophet speaks, their message should be 'weighed': tested by the wider Body to see if it seems right (1 Thessalonians 5:20-22). Prophets are a gift from God, to help our corps to walk with him into the wonderfully astounding adventure ahead of us.

Activities for practising hearing God together

Practising the art of the jigsaw puzzle:

Give each person in your congregation a jigsaw piece made of card, approximately six inches long. Each piece should have at least one protruding circle and one indented hole around its edge, so that they can be joined together.

Invite everyone to spend some time prayerfully thinking about the answer to these two questions:

- Which word or phrase sums up what God is doing in my life at the moment?
- Which word or phrase sums up what I think God is doing in our corps at the moment?

Then ask them to write the answer to question 1 in the centre of their jigsaw piece, and the answer to question 2 on the protruding connecting circle. (NB You will need to simplify the questions for the children taking part.)

When you've gathered all the pieces, make a display with them all connected together. You may find you can arrange them in such a way that some fascinating patterns emerge.

Practising the art of corporate discernment:

We're used to the idea of voting on things, but sometimes we need a vote with a bit more depth to it. Next time your corps encounters a situation where there's a decision to be made (one which can be shared with everyone), why not explain it clearly to the congregation. Ask people to pray about it in their own prayer-times, then write down which option they think should be taken, and why. Then put a box out to collect the responses.

However varied and unscientific an exercise like this can be, the process of reading people's reflections can be invaluable in helping discern what God is saying.

Practise the art of creative community:

In Section 2 we discovered that God speaks through our creative gifts as much as through our thoughts and words. Why not have a corps talent day, where people can perform, bring their art and craft to display, and contribute their culinary skills to provide the refreshments? It's a lot of fun, and you might be surprised to find that God speaks through it.

Practise the art of risky community:

It's tempting to think that we should leave Godly risk-taking to individuals, while our corps continues to operate in a predictable, pre-programmed way. But the lives of Elijah and Elisha present us with the challenge that people may not find God, and society may never be changed, if God's people don't take risks to bring those who don't know him yet into contact with him.

As you look around your corps, who are the risk-takers? Who are the people who are listening to God, then stepping out of their comfort zones to make him known? How can you actively support them, and perhaps even join in?

If you are a leader in your corps, are you positively encouraging Godly risk-taking? Do you know whom God has given a risky vision to? Do you commit time, energy and resources to initiatives which seem risky, but which have the potential to connect people to the miracle-working, life-changing power of God?

Further Reading

Standing on my Knees: Establishing a Lifeline of Prayer, Jeff Lucas, Monarch Books, 2013

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Beginner's Guide to the Gift of Prophecy, Jack Deere, Regal Books, 2009

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