

His Gentle Voice

JUDITH COUCHMAN

Listening for God in Everyday Moments

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in Everyday Moments*



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*For Nancy Lemons,
my forever friend*



If we wish to know Him, we may hear His gentle voice saying, "Come and see."

CHARLES SPURGEON

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A c k n o w l e d g m e n t s



When an author collaborates on five books with the same editor, either the relationship is exceptional or somebody is codependent. Fortunately for me, my author-editor bond with Carol Bartley is a gift to be treasured, growing richer through the years and welling up as a source of constant learning.

Carol is the detail person I am not, and though I jokingly called her the “Word Police,” I know that when she reviews my manuscript, it is in loving and capable hands. Her insights improve a book’s readability and sensibility, and without her pragmatism I’d probably descend into metaphors so obscure no reader would follow me there. Carol possesses the remarkable ability to critique my work, even tell me unpleasant news, in a manner so gracious I think I’ve just been complimented. She has a case of perennial politeness from which I hope she never recovers. It is greatly needed in the publishing industry and the world. Most of all, Carol has turned into a warm and trusted friend. For all she does for me, for all that she is, I deeply thank her.

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I n t r o d u c t i o n



For over thirty years Margaret has been one of my mother's dearest friends. Margaret attended the tiny church of my youth, and she frequently talked about how much she loved God. She often said, "Isn't the Lord good?" as more of a statement than a question and spent hours reading her well-worn Bible. Margaret also seemed to possess a special connection to God, receiving poignant answers to her prayers and hearing specific guidance from Him. She talked with Jesus as if He were standing next to her in the flesh and His voice sounded gentle and kind.

As a young teenager I bumped into conflicting feelings about Margaret's communication with God. I wanted to run away from her. I wanted to be just like her. Although this is a common response to godliness, back then I only knew that Margaret had something I wasn't sure I could get. To me, she lived "up there" in the mountaintop experiences of apostles and prophets. I wandered the foothills. At the same time, Margaret was pragmatic and approachable. A widow, she struggled with the emotions and practicalities of finances, the trials of raising a teenage daughter, her own shortcomings, and encroaching loneliness. Yet she brimmed with hugs and good words for "folks," and people easily loved her.

How can she be so close to God yet so down to earth? I asked myself, as if the two were mutually exclusive.

Margaret's most profound influence on me—and all those who knew her—occurred several years after her husband's death when her son, daughter-in-law, and two grandchildren were killed in a head-on car collision. In unutterable pain she smiled through the tears and said, "We can trust the Lord." I could only guess that her straight talk with God was comforting and holding her up. How else could she have put one foot in front of the other?

I live many miles away now, but I'm always pleased when Mom says she's spent a day with Margaret. The two women are affected by some distance and the slowing down of age, so they meet only occasionally, but they are still soul mates. I know their days together fill with talk about children and grandchildren, projects and prayer requests, and most of all Jesus, who Margaret still believes is incredibly good. Mom returns from these visits happy and encouraged, as she should be. Visiting Margaret also means spending time with God.



How have we acquired the idea that God reserves His communication for "perfect" and "super spiritual" Christians and not everyday, flawed people like ourselves? Perhaps we've been mistaught about God's ways with humanity. Maybe the notion is part of passed-along Christian folklore. Or perhaps it reveals our personal insecurities and misconceptions of God's character. However the idea originated, it is not biblical.

Undoubtedly God can and does communicate through extra-

ordinary means and mountaintop experiences, through times of solitude and pulling away from the world. But God is everywhere and can speak anywhere. He calls out appointed prophets and contemplatives, but most often He wants His people to become Margarets, carrying His guidance and affirmation into the encounters and commitments of real-world lives.

Accordingly, God speaks to us in the midst of our days, in the places where we live and work and pray, be they quiet or chaotic. Still, we need to learn to listen, not with fear or formulas but with open, tender, expectant hearts. The Quaker statesman William Penn wrote, “Men may tire themselves in a labyrinth of search, and talk of God; but if we would know Him indeed, it must be from the impressions we receive of Him; and the softer our hearts are, the deeper and livelier those will be upon us.”¹

My hope is that these pages will encourage you toward discovering this truth—so in the everyday moments you’ll hear His gentle voice.

Judith Couchman

The Hearing Heart



*When we believe that God lovingly seeks our best
and that He is vastly more sensitive to us
than we are to ourselves, we will seek to hear Him.
When we doubt God's intentions, His intimate caring,
or His ability to speak directly and work powerfully in our lives,
we may go through the motions...
but [we] won't be listening expectantly for God.*

M A R T H A T H A T C H E R

Hannah was a desperate woman.

Year after year when she packed for the annual trip to Shiloh with her husband, Elkanah, her heart filled with dread. There they would present sacrifices and offerings to the Lord in His house. There they would celebrate Jehovah's goodness to them. There, once again, Hannah would feel humiliated.

"But why?" asked Elkanah, cupping Hannah's face in his weathered

hands and kissing the lips he adored. “Why are you so sad? Why can’t you enjoy our trip to the holy temple?”

Hannah tried to explain, for she deeply loved her husband, but the words jumbled, and her eyes puddled with tears. Moving his hands to Hannah’s back and pulling her to his chest, Elkanah implored, “Why, my dear wife?”

With her head tucked under his chin, she sobbed, “I speak to the Lord, and He does not talk back to me. Nor does He answer my pleas for a child.”

Elkanah sighed and kissed the top of Hannah’s head. “Don’t I mean more to you than ten sons?” he asked quietly.

“You are everything a husband can mean to a wife,” she answered. “But I cannot extinguish my desire to conceive. It burns within me.”

Hannah was not ungrateful for Elkanah’s attention or his husbandly protection and provision. Many women in her hill community endured their marriages; their spouses treated them as mere chattel, as objects to own rather than lovers to cherish. But not Elkanah. He delighted in Hannah and favored her. Each year when he sacrificed to the Lord, Elkanah gave portions of the meat to his other wife, Peninnah, and to all her sons and daughters. But to Hannah he gave a double portion as a symbol of his enduring love, even with Peninnah’s jealous eyes watching him. Even though Hannah bore him no children,

Yet as much as he tried, Elkanah couldn’t understand the depth of Hannah’s pain. The maternal instinct, deep as the soul itself. The shame when neighbors insinuated her barrenness was God’s curse for some secret sin. The taunting from the “other woman” in Elkanah’s

life who plentifully bore him heirs and sneered at infertility. The desire to complete her marriage—to express her love with the greatest gift she could give, the birth of a son.

Perhaps Elkanah didn't want to feel the pain, for fear it would tear him asunder. Perhaps he was busy in the fields and oblivious to Hannah's daily troubles, as husbands sometimes are. Perhaps she kept her humiliation from him. Whatever the reason for his perplexity, Hannah needed more than Elkanah's soothing words. For the pain within, for the barrenness of her womb, she needed to hear from God.



This went on year after year. Whenever Hannah went up to the house of the LORD, her rival [Peninnah] provoked her till she wept and would not eat.

Once when they had finished eating and drinking in Shiloh, Hannah stood up. Now Eli the priest was sitting on a chair by the doorpost of the LORD's temple. In bitterness of soul Hannah wept much and prayed to the LORD. And she made a vow, saying, "O LORD Almighty, if you will only look upon your servant's misery and remember me, and not forget your servant but give her a son, then I will give him to the LORD for all the days of his life, and no razor will ever be used on his head."

As she kept on praying to the LORD, Eli observed her mouth. Hannah was praying in her heart, and her lips were moving but her voice was not heard. Eli thought she was drunk and said to her, "How long will you keep on getting drunk? Get rid of your wine."

“Not so, my lord,” Hannah replied, “I am a woman who is deeply troubled. I have not been drinking wine or beer; I was pouring out my soul to the LORD. Do not take your servant for a wicked woman; I have been praying here out of my great anguish and grief.”

Eli answered, “Go in peace, and may the God of Israel grant you what you have asked of him.”

She said, “May your servant find favor in your eyes.”¹



When Hannah unlimbered her body from the temple floor, something had changed. Perhaps God had whispered in her ear. Perhaps Eli’s blessing had been the Lord’s words and they strengthened her.

Hannah did not say, but something within secured her heart. She ran back to the feast, cradled the meat in her hands, and thanked Elkanah for his generous helpings. She ate heartily, then looked into his astonished face and liberated her girlish laugh.

This is the Hannah I married, thought Elkanah. This is the wife I want to carry home and embrace in nights of love.



Early the next morning they arose and worshiped before the LORD and then went back to their home at Ramah. Elkanah lay with Hannah his wife, and the LORD remembered her. So in the course of time Hannah conceived and gave birth to a son. She named him Samuel, saying, “Because I asked the LORD for him.”

After he was weaned, she took the boy with her, young as he was,

along with a three-year-old bull, an ephah of flour and a skin of wine, and brought him to the house of the LORD at Shiloh. When they had slaughtered the bull, they brought the boy to Eli, and she said to him, "As surely as you live, my lord, I am the woman who stood here beside you praying to the LORD. I prayed for this child, and the LORD has granted me what I asked of him. So now I give him to the LORD. For his whole life he will be given over to the LORD." And he worshiped the LORD there.

Then Elkanah went home to Ramah, but the boy ministered before the LORD under Eli the priest.²

T H E I N E V I T A B L E N E E D

Into every woman's life there enters times when nothing but God's voice will do. Only His words will soothe her; only His promise can guide her. She may find consolation with loved ones; she might solicit advice from the experts. She may gather human wisdom and comfort and warnings, but no earthly communication can compare to the sound of His voice. Like Hannah lying prostrate in the temple, she pleads with God. Like Mary grieved and alone in the garden, she wants to cry "Rabboni!" when He gently speaks her name.

These are not the pleas of the demanding wife, the insatiable female. They are the cries of one who longs for the reassuring voice of her beloved. Like the lover in the Song of Songs, she sighs, "Show me your face, let me hear your voice" (2:14). She needs to hear from the person who will walk through the pain with her. It is a spontaneous

and inevitable request, not because she is suffocatingly dependent but because the bonds of connection strengthen in crisis. When my sister learned of her son's terrible accident in another state, she immediately cried out for her husband. She needed the comfort of his presence but also the familiarity of his voice to assuage the pain.

The sound of a loved one's voice can calm the heart. Even in less dire or everyday circumstances this is true. "When I was a boy and sick in bed, the sound of my mother's voice in the kitchen comforted me and made me feel secure, even when I couldn't catch what she was saying," admitted my former pastor in a sermon. "These days when I am ill, I am comforted by the sound of my wife's voice in another room." We all need these touch points. When a family member returns from a trip, he calls out, "I'm home!" and expects a familiar voice to respond. When a friend rings my phone and says, "I just needed to hear your voice," we both feel nurtured.

Still, we need more than comfort from a familiar voice, as wonderful as those reassurances may be. From this person we also desire mutual guidance, partnership, enjoyment, trustworthiness, love. In our daily lives we want a steady stream of relationship with this individual. Then when a dam breaks, we can hear the familiar voice above the flood's roar. We already trust this person's faithfulness toward us and willingly listen to his or her advice. We do not need to get acquainted in the midst of difficulty.

So it is with God. When we are troubled, we need to hear His voice. We want the certainty of Isaiah's words: "Although the Lord gives you the bread of adversity and the water of affliction, your

teachers will be hidden no more; with your own eyes you will see them. Whether you turn to the right or to the left, your ears will hear a voice behind you” (Isaiah 30:20–21). Yet we also crave daily fellowship with God, the intimate musings and everyday talks between the Father and His child. In the day-to-day decisions and directions, the routine chores and spontaneous joys, we want to hear His voice.

But how do we prompt God to speak to us?

I’ve wrestled with this question many times. On the one hand, I’ve learned I can’t cajole or pressure the Creator into speaking to me. God is mighty and mysterious. He communicates to whomever He will, whenever and however He chooses to speak. He is not bound by human formulas, no matter how ardently we believe in them. Just when we think we’ve figured out His pattern, He does something that startles and proves us wrong—not because He is uncaring but because He is omnipotent and can’t be predicted and controlled according to human logic.

Accordingly, God doesn’t talk just to those who walk closely with Him. Scripture reveals that He speaks to both the righteous and unrighteous, the obedient and disobedient, the attentive and inattentive. If necessary, He’ll use a donkey’s mouth to get His message across (Numbers 22:28), but we cannot force Him to speak.

On the other hand, God the Father wants to speak to us. He is gracious and desirous of our companionship. He longs to spend time with His children—communing, comforting, leading, protecting—not out of duty but with delight. The Bible depicts Him as the Redeemer, continually reaching out to His beloved, always pursuing us

with love. In turn, God's Word also claims that if we call, He will answer. "This is what the LORD says, he who made the earth, the LORD who formed it and established it—the LORD is his name: 'Call to me and I will answer you and tell you great and unsearchable things you do not know'" (Jeremiah 33:2–3). The Lord waits for our call, ever ready to answer. He wants us to know Him and His plans for us.

Consequently, a vital relationship with God holds these two perspectives in balance; understanding that God is not bound by our opinions about how and when He should speak but knowing He desires to talk with us. This is good news! The Almighty speaking to the lowly, not just dictating His messages but inviting the mutuality of two-way conversation. And though we can't box in His methods and timing, we can prepare our hearts to hear Him when He speaks. Like Hannah, we can become women searching for Jehovah's voice.

S h i f t i n g O u r D e s i r e s

When I attended high school, my father periodically worked the late-night shift. I'd frequently go to bed before he arrived home from work and then leave for classes the next morning without seeing him. However, I did not forget he was the source for my lunch money and other financial quandaries. Nor did I waver on communicating with him about my empty billfold. At night I'd leave a note on the dining room table that explained my dilemma: "Dad, I need two dollars for lunch tomorrow." Or, "Could I have \$10 to go to the football game?" The next morning the money appeared on the dining room table on top of my note.

It was a simple supply-and-demand relationship. No conversation, no listening to my father's thoughts, no intimacy. I loved my father deeply, but with teenage immaturity I expected Dad to answer my needs immediately without regard for what it cost him or for what he wanted. (My father only made a modest income, but he consistently produced the exact amount I requested.) Dad took seriously the responsibility to provide for his family, but now I wonder if he ever wanted to talk with me first—if he wanted to develop a relationship—instead of just plopping money on a table.

I'll never know. Dad died a few years later.

Looking back, I treasure my father's constancy toward me, but I also grieve the loss of relationship. Though I know Dad accepted my self-focus as part of the teenage years, and he didn't rebuke my attitude, I wish I'd understood that he had dreams and desires, too. I wish I'd asked him what those were. Tonight I'd love to greet him at the door and offer him a cup of decaf, along with the newspaper (his late-night ritual). But most of all I'd like to ask, "Dad, what do you want to tell me? What can I do for you?"

In a similar fashion it's possible not to mature beyond a self-centered relationship with the heavenly Father. In our prayers and longings we focus on our requests and eclipse knowing God and His thoughts. When we listen for His voice, we practice selective hearing, centering on what we want from Him rather than what He asks of us. We act as though God exists to serve us rather than our living to serve Him. The Scriptures encourage us to ask, seek, and knock (Matthew 7:7) but to ask according to His will and purpose in our

lives (1 John 5:14). They also explain that we do not receive because we ask with wrong motives, “that [we] may spend what [we] get on [our] pleasures” (James 4:3). God gives us the desires of our hearts, but He asks that we delight in Him first (Psalm 37:4), and as we do so, we adopt His desires and alter our own.

Even if we’re earnest about serving God, we can try using Him as a stamp of approval on our goals rather than listening to His plans for us. “We are a ‘doing’ people. We always want to be doing something,” explains Henry T. Blackaby in his workbook *Experiencing God*. “I think God is crying out and shouting to us, ‘Don’t just do something. Stand there! Enter into a love relationship with Me. Get to know Me. Adjust your life to Me. Let Me love you and reveal Myself to you as I work through you.’ A time will come when the doing will be called for, but we cannot skip the relationship. The relationship with God must come first.”³

A relationship with God precedes our hearing from Him—a relationship in which we allow God to shift our desires. If we’re willing to listen to what the Creator says rather than what we want to hear, if we’re committed to knowing Him and His plans for us instead of demanding our own way, He will speak. God confides in the person with a “hearing heart.”

L i s t e n i n g a n d H e a r i n g

“We are talking, but you’re not hearing what I say!”

More than once I’ve been told this by an exasperated friend. The

first time someone accused me of conversing but not hearing I couldn't even grasp the concept. *What? Relating without hearing? How could that be?* But gradually as I've observed conversations, I've noticed my shabby listening skills. I've interrupted the speaker, barging in with my thoughts before she finishes hers. Or as she's talked, I've thought about what I want to say next, without truly listening. Or instead of focusing on her, I've continually referred back to my own needs and opinions. Or I've practiced all these annoyances at once, producing a friend's outburst.

Recognizing my inattentiveness and working on truly hearing hasn't been easy, but as I've made incremental progress, I've learned that blathering doesn't deepen a relationship. Hearing does.

When Christ's disciples weren't absorbing the truths He taught and modeled for them, He asked, "Do you have eyes but fail to see, and ears but fail to hear?" (Mark 8:18). He wanted them to open their ears and hearts so listening to Him would impact their lives.

James warned, "Do not merely listen to the word [of God], and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. But the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it—he will be blessed in what he does" (James 1:22–25). When we hear God's voice, He asks the same "doing" of us.

But how do we cultivate a hearing heart? Hannah of the Old Testament reveals qualities we can emulate.

🕯 *Searching.* I revel in the story of Hannah, drunk with urgent prayers, searching for God with an unquenchable thirst. She assures me that God rewards those who seek Him with all their hearts. The Bible says, “If...you seek the LORD your God, you will find him if you look for him with all your heart and with all your soul” (Deuteronomy 4:29). And, “You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you” (Jeremiah 29:13–14).

We search for God by praying, reading and meditating on His Word, participating in His Church, opening our eyes to His presence in everyday life, and in other ways unique to us. Whatever the method, when we wholeheartedly seek God, we will find Him, and finding Him, we can hear His voice. But first the question, *Are we willing to search?*

🕯 *Believing.* Somewhere in her life Hannah heard about Jehovah and believed. She believed in God’s promises and power to change lives. She believed in His desire to communicate with His people and answer their prayers. Most of all she believed in God’s love and goodness—that He gives good gifts to His children. Why else would she have been so persistent, so willing to prostrate herself in the temple, not caring about looking foolish?

The passage in Jeremiah that implores us to search for God adds this promise: “For I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the LORD, ‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you’” (29:11–12). When we search for God and find Him, we encounter a good Master, who speaks with love. Even if

He offers correction, we need not fear His voice. His motivations are good and beneficial to us.

Before Samuel was born, the omnipotent God had slated him to serve in the temple. Hannah would not give up on pregnancy because this generous Maker had dropped the desire into her heart. Centuries later the apostle James explained, “Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows” (James 1:17). Understanding this, when we listen for God’s voice, *do we believe in His goodness?*

✠ *Repenting.* Though I can’t prove this with an exact verse, I believe Hannah moved from wanting a child for personal reasons to desiring God’s purposes fulfilled through her. To repent means to “turn around,” and Hannah initiated a radical, about-face move. Instead of clinging to the child-mother bond she craved, before Samuel’s conception she offered him back to God for the priesthood. With trembling lips and tender heart she vowed, “O LORD Almighty, if you will only look upon your servant’s misery and remember me, and not forget your servant but give her a son, then I will give him to the LORD for all the days of his life, and no razor will ever be used on his head” (1 Samuel 1:11).

Flawed and weary and wracked with pain, Hannah turned from her own way and handed the situation back to God. As soon as she did, the Bible says, “she went her way and ate something, and her face was no longer downcast” (verse 18). When Hannah changed her mind, it’s possible God spoke to her at this point, for her spirit lightened, and she left the temple at peace. It’s not evident what happened between the

vow and her departure, but it's apparent that when Hannah loosened her grip, she received from God.

With a similar mind-set, we may need to repent of sins, desires, attitudes, and motivations or merely change our way of thinking before we can hear God's voice. We need to ask, *Are we willing to repent?*

✠ *Waiting.* "I wait for you, O LORD; you will answer, O Lord my God," wrote David (Psalm 38:15), who spent many years of his life waiting for divine interventions. It's possible David learned about waiting for God's voice from Samuel, who anointed him for kingship. Maybe in a conversation with the young shepherd, the old priest reminisced about his mother, Hannah, who learned to wait on God for what felt like an eternity. The connection of Hannah to Samuel to David is fascinating, and in our own lives, learning to wait could yield equally intriguing associations. We don't know what creative surprises God holds in store. We're just told to wait.

As perplexing as it can be, God doesn't speak on our timetable, and His ways are inscrutable. Still, if we belong to God, we need to hear His voice for direction. If we act with God's guidance, the outcome can be powerful. (Remember David and Goliath.) If we act apart from Him, we create disasters. (Also remember David and Bathsheba.) So if we need to hear God's voice, *are we willing to wait?*

✠ *Obeying.* When Samuel was born, Hannah didn't forget her promise to God. Though it wrenched the mother's soul to relinquish her boy, to place his chubby hand in Eli's and walk away, she kept her vow. No matter the cost. In essence, this is obedience. We make a commitment to God and follow through on it. When we hear from

Him, we do what He says. Jesus said, “Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it” (Luke 11:28). So counting the cost, *are we willing to obey?*

In 1915 during the Great War, a young Scotsman stood in his friend’s kitchen, ready to say good-bye. “I am going out to Egypt to help the men in the armed forces,” said the athletic-looking Oswald Chambers. “I have a Bible text: ‘I am now ready to be offered’ (2 Timothy 4:6). I do not know what it means, but I am ready.”⁴

This is how Oswald Chambers approached his spiritual life and calling. He didn’t need to understand everything God wanted from him; it only mattered that he unswervingly followed the Lord. This attitude of obedience led him from an artistic career into the ministry, first as an itinerant evangelist, then as a Bible college teacher, and finally as a spiritual shepherd to troops at war in Egypt.

Years before, Oswald had written: “I feel I shall be buried for a time, hidden away in obscurity; then suddenly I shall flame out, do my work and be gone.” His instincts proved true. While in Egypt the revered teacher fell ill quickly and died at age forty-three.

From a physical viewpoint God cut short His servant’s life, but from a spiritual perspective the obedient Scot still deeply affects lives today. Eighty years after his death, Oswald’s teachings thrive through many books based on his wife Gertrude’s shorthand notes of his sermons. In addition, his perennial devotional, *My Utmost for His Highest*, has sold millions of copies and ranks among the world’s classics.

Such popularity would have surprised and embarrassed Oswald,

who never intended for his works to be published. He only wanted to hear and obey God.

This, too, is the desire of the hearing heart. Not to seek its own purposes, not to pursue human adulation, but to find and follow the divine agenda.



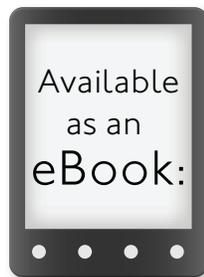
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