

THE COMPLETE GUIDE
to the
Prayers
of
JESUS

JANET HOLM MCHENRY



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To the Lord Jesus Christ:
I pray these words are worthy
of the calling you have on my life,
but even more so, are worthy
of having your name on the cover
and within these pages.

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Foreword

When I want to learn something, I want to learn from the best. One of the best ways of learning or honing a skill is to be mentored by an expert—someone who knows the intricacies and the secrets, and who knows from experience the challenges. In being mentored, I will be afforded more than information and knowledge; I will learn from my mentor’s life. My mentor will lead me hands-on through the new skill until it becomes my second nature. My mentor will reproduce his own experience in me.

Janet introduces us to Jesus, Prayer Mentor. The living, indwelling, right-now Jesus will teach us to pray in real time. From him, we will learn more than prayer theology, though we will learn that as well.

Jesus knows what makes prayer work, and he is perfectly willing to teach us the secret. In my own life, I replaced the thought of saying prayers—sandwiching words between “Dear God” and “Amen”—with the awareness of being in the flow of his power and provision. I expanded my definition of prayer so that it includes the continual interaction between the material and the spiritual realm—sometimes articulated, but often simply an inarticulate flow between his heart and mine.

E. Stanley Jones articulates it this way in *Abundant Living*: “Gracious Christ, teach me to pray. For if I fall down here, I fall down everywhere—anemia spreads through my whole being. Give me the mind to pray, the love to pray, the will to pray. Let prayer be the aroma of every act, the atmosphere of every thought, my native air. In Your name. Amen.”¹

Janet shows us that Jesus as our Prayer Mentor will impart to us his own heart and mind, not simply to teach us his methods, but to reproduce his prayer life in us. We see clearly in the gospels that Jesus’ life of prayer showed up in his life of power. Janet makes it clear in this comprehensive look at the prayer life of Jesus that this is his goal for us. That prayer will not be just a ritual or a discipline, but instead will be life and breath.

Even for Jesus, keeping his heart connected to the Father’s required deliberate intention and decision. Jesus was one in nature with the Father from the beginning, but was a separate being. He chose submission as the very tenor of his life, but he also chose to obey in the moment as the moment arose.

As he walked out his days in step with the Father through prayer, his perfectly choreographed obedience seemed to come effortlessly. He seemed to know instinctively what the Father was doing at any given juncture. Doing the Father’s will appeared to be the natural cadence of his life. The connection was kept always fresh through prayer.

Janet has written a book that will pull you into the very same kind of connected relationship with him that he had with his Father as he lived life in the nature of a man. It is well researched, thorough, and engagingly written.

Jennifer Kennedy Dean

Author of *Live a Praying Life* and
executive director of the Praying Life Foundation

Acknowledgments

The writing of this book came during a very challenging season when I was completely dependent upon prayer, encouragement from God’s Word, and great portions of grace from my family, especially my husband, Craig; my mom, Doris Holm; my daughters, Rebekah Perez and Bethany Mariconda; my sister and brother-in-law, Roberta and Steve Martinez; my niece, Rachel Stewart; and my sister-in-law, Lisa Puglisi. It took a Holm/McHenry village to write a book and move my mom and her ninety years of love from Wheel C Ranch into her new Holm-sweet-Holm. As Dad used to say, “Wheel C,” which I’m realizing truly was a metaphor for expectant prayer.

Writing *The Complete Guide to the Prayers of Jesus* was such a privilege that every time I sat down to study, research, write notes, or put words on the computer screen, I was completely humbled that I could be given this opportunity. Thank you, Kim Bangs, Sharon Hodge, Leeanna Nelson, David Horton, and all the folks at Bethany House. I am so thankful for you all. To God be the glory.

Introduction

Jesus, Our Mentor in Prayer

From his spot at the head of the table, Jesus looked around the dimly lit room. Peter's wife and mother-in-law stood wiping the cooking pot and bowls near the fire. He had grown fond of them, as well as their offering each evening of well-seasoned fish and lentil stew, sopped up with a hearty chunk of bread. For months now his Capernaum hosts nightly had spread mats on the floor around the rough-hewn table in the small main room, for him, Peter, James, John, and a handful of other followers. Though the others were talking quietly—occasionally glancing over at Jesus to ask a question—a tension was building inside of him. He had to meet with his Father.

As Jesus stood and walked toward the door, the others looked up but did not protest his leaving the relative warmth of the small stone home in the dead of winter. They understood. He often withdrew to quiet places to pray.

Jesus stepped out into the darkness, draped his head with his white linen covering, and pulled his woolen upper garment around himself more snugly. The cold evening air smarted on

his uncovered hands and sandaled feet. But at least the streets were quiet. When the sun had fallen late that afternoon, the crowds of people seeking a healing touch or even just a word from Jesus had slowly disbursed. They would seek him out the next day . . . and the next . . . and the next. Their needs were never ending, like the lapping waves on the nearby Sea of Galilee.

The water moved in darkness to his left, but this evening's meeting place was in the hills to his right. Jesus headed toward a well-worn path up the mountain's slope with much on his mind and heart. His teachings and miracles were drawing attention. Seekers were listening to his interpretations of the law at synagogues in various towns throughout Galilee, but the Pharisees were beginning to challenge him.

When Jesus forgave the sins of the paralytic man, the Pharisees said he was speaking blasphemy—considered the most serious sin because it was cursing God. When his followers gleaned some grain in local fields after the harvest, the Pharisees accused him of dishonoring the Sabbath, a day set aside solely for worship of the Lord God. Even worse, when he healed a man with a shriveled hand on the Sabbath, they grew furious and began plotting against him.

Clearly, his ministry could come to an end soon—and he needed his Father's guidance. Who would carry the message of life-giving grace when he was gone? More than a hundred people were following him daily as he traveled from town to town. Yet who among them should be his disciples?

One man—a teacher of the law—had even said, “Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go.”

Jesus had responded that even though foxes have holes and birds have nests, he had no place to sleep at night. Who would follow him into homelessness?

Another follower had said he would follow Jesus, but asked him to “first let me go and bury my father.”

“Follow me,” Jesus replied, “and let the dead bury the dead.”

Jesus knew that the challenges he was facing paled in view of the Cross ahead. Would any disciple follow him, pray for him, understand his calling and purpose, and remain faithful after his death?

His Father would know.

After a trek of twenty minutes, Jesus reached a mountain-side spot away from the sounds of the city. He turned toward Capernaum, its home fires barely visible under the cloud-covered moon. And he prayed.

“Abba, Father . . .”

The damp night air settled over him as the fires gradually dimmed in the city below. Jesus prostrated himself on the rocky hillside.

“Abba, Father . . .”

As the moon faded to nothing behind the clouds, Jesus heard a stirring behind him in the rocks above. *Just a family of hyraxes digging new trails. No one but the watchman is awake at this third watch of the night.*

“Abba, Father . . .”

Then he fell silent, listening for more than the wind or the hillside animals or the lapping waves below. He would stay and listen for his Father’s words . . . and he would know which twelve should be his apostles, the message bearers of lifesaving truth.

Eventually night turned to dawn, the sun rising behind the mountains east of the Sea of Galilee as a brilliant golden ball surrounded by an aura of orange that filled the sky and warmed the blues of the sea. Jesus raised his arms toward heaven, thankful to the Father for hearing him and for speaking into his heart, mind, and soul.

A short time later he slipped back down the mountain into Capernaum, stepped through Peter’s door, and shared morning bread with the drowsy disciples. And he announced the names

of the chosen Twelve—one of whom would eventually betray him, one of whom would deny him, and all of whom would temporarily turn away in just over a year’s time.

But peace rested on Jesus’ countenance as he looked among the group of ordinary men that included fishermen, a tax collector, a revolutionary, a quibbler, and others. Because he had spent the evening in prayer and would continue to pray through the rest of his days on earth, he could rest in the confidence that his Father was guiding him step by step in his walk to the Cross.



In the early years of my Christian walk, I never really thought about learning to pray by taking a close look at Jesus’ prayers and his prayer life in general. Even in my growing-up years in a faithful, churchgoing family, we only prayed grace over dinner and “Now I lay me down to sleep. . . .” In my church we recited beautiful prayers from a book. But we approached everyday life with German/Finnish resolve and faced big decisions with comparison charts, lists, and logic—not prayer.

When I gave my heart to Christ in college, I had an immediate hunger to learn more about the Savior I now loved with all my being—an insatiable desire to read his Word. But somehow I was sidetracked with theological studies about grace, forgiveness, redemption, transformation, and sanctification. And while I read, studied, and even taught the Bible from one end to the other, I lost sight of prayer. So my own growing family prayed grace over dinner and “Now I lay me down to sleep. . . .”

Certainly, prayer darts were thrown toward the skies in frantic moments. For goodness’ sake, I had four children who loved to torment each other, it seemed, thus tormenting my husband, Craig, and me.

Introduction

Lord, please stop that child from being such a tease.

Father, do they really need to climb out of their windows at night?

A cigarette in the wash, Lord? Why is that child smoking?

Yes, I had read the book that taught prayer is conversation with God. And yes, I'm a pretty good conversationalist. Yes, I know questioning and listening are integral parts of prayer. Yes, I know that conversation is not all about me.

How was your day, God?

Not so good?

Neither was mine. Here's the deal. . . .

You see, for me, prayer was still something on my to-do list. Bible reading, check. Prayer, check. Shower, check.

It still hadn't quite clicked that prayer is like breathing. You need it for a vital faithwalk. Blow the bad stuff out, breathe in the good.

And then I began prayerwalking.

After our second child headed off to college, I decided to work on my health. And because I'm a good multitasker, I decided to check Prayer off the daily list, too, and pray as I walked. One morning a few months into the routine, I saw what I call a Single Daddy's Ballet. In the dark hours of the morning, the young man handed over his blanketed toddler girl to the day-care worker at the center's entrance, and that blanketed bundle said, "Bye, Daddy, love you." Because of that ten-second vignette, God led me to switch my prayer focus from self to sight—and still, as I walk or drive or stand in a checkout line, I pray for whatever God puts in my eyesight.

This new focus made me determined to learn as much as I could about prayer, so I began searching for evidence of it in the

Bible, marking the margins all the way from Genesis to Revelation with a circled *P* whenever I found a reference (hundreds and hundreds of them)—someone praying, God speaking to his people, instruction about prayer.

I also have spent a chunk of life studying Jesus' prayer life: what he taught about prayer, what he did as a practice, and his prayers themselves. It's interesting that John starts his biography of the Christ with, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning" (John 1:1–2). But millennia after that beginning of life on earth, the Word then became the emissary on earth. The Word came to us, leaving his heavenly home with the Father to provide a way for us to establish an eternal connection and conversation with the Father.

Separation from the Father must have been hard. Those of you who have experienced sending a child off to college, or off on a plane, or even off with Grandma and Grandpa for a vacation understand that dichotomy of emotions. Your beloved child is headed for a grand adventure—one that will bring much good. But the separation is painful. A part of your very being has been ripped away, it seems. The one compensation—especially in these modern times—is that you can communicate fairly easily with phone calls, texts, messages, and more.

So, too, did Jesus the Son, the Word made flesh, communicate with God the Father—through prayer. Old-school FaceTime. The Son of Man instantly in the presence of the Creator.

This wasn't so new. Jesus was born into a family that prayed. His mother Mary sang a song of praise when she found out she was pregnant (Luke 1:46–55). The Lord sent angels to reassure Mary's fiancé, Joseph, that the Holy Spirit had conceived the child. The Lord also nudged Joseph to go into exile when King Herod went on a killing spree of baby boys in hopes of eliminating the Messiah. Family members Elizabeth and Zechariah praised God for his goodness in bringing them a child in their

old age. Jesus' family naturally went to the Father with praise and for direction.

Jesus would grow “in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and all the people” (Luke 2:52 NLT) because his short walk on earth would be done prayerfully. He had daily rhythms of prayer, times when he got alone with God. He lived intentionally with guidance from the Lord God. In anticipation of challenge and suffering, he looked up for strength.

As we also learn to grow in wisdom, stature, and favor with God, we can look to our Master Teacher and his prayers—not necessarily to copy or memorize—but to inform and develop our own conversations with the Father. Each of the fourteen chapters in this book examines the significance of one of Jesus' prayers, incorporating his related teachings and personal practices. From them we can gather insights about how to make prayer more natural in our lives—a first response rather than a last resort. You'll also find at the end of each chapter a prayer for you that I hope will help you pray intentionally and strategically, as each is based on God's Word. I have also included questions for study and reflection as you are growing in prayer.

I am excited for you to discover more about Jesus' prayer life, because I believe it will teach you how to develop a deeper relationship with our Father in heaven. No matter what your faith background, you can look to Jesus as your personal mentor, teacher, and example. From him we learn that prayer is as essential as breathing. Breathe in his words and teachings, reader, and you will find that your new life of prayer fills you with the strength and direction you'll need for anything that blows your way.

Chapter 1

Jesus Listened in Prayer

I was having the hardest time getting my high school seniors to pay attention in English class as I prepped them for their senior play performance. The biggest distractor was a beautiful, blue-eyed, long-haired brunette with an engaging smile and chatty manner. She sat in the middle of the classroom and seemingly loved to comment on my every remark.

Finally, I stopped what I was saying and looked pointedly at her. The rest of the room got the hint, but she kept chatting with her neighbors. Even Robert, the one who competed with her for the Most Talkative Award, had stopped and then blurted out, “Rebekah, stop talking! Your mom’s trying to say something.”

Yes, she was my daughter—our oldest and the most outgoing of our four children. She was the first to fall victim to having her mother as the English teacher for all juniors and seniors in our small high school, and she probably compensated for her embarrassment of me by chatting it up—a lot.

Many of us fail to listen, don’t we? In conversations, we often are silently preparing for our next brilliant comment instead

of truly absorbing what a friend is trying to communicate. As we jockey for the most witty remark or make our mental list of how to solve our friends' many problems, we might miss the verbal nudges that would move us the most or the emotional nuances that could give us insight to meet our friends' otherwise veiled needs.

There are three recorded instances of Jesus' hearing from his heavenly Father. It's interesting that the first recorded instance of his prayer life in the gospels is also one that results in audibly hearing from the Father.

Jesus, just starting his ministry, arrived at the Judean area of the Jordan River, roughly sixty miles south of his hometown of Nazareth. His second cousin, John, was preaching and baptizing at the river. John had traveled from the hill country of Judea, undoubtedly near Jerusalem, because his father, Zechariah, served in the temple there as a priest. (For geography aficionados: Nazareth is in the region of Galilee, which lies to the west of the Sea of Galilee in the north. Judea is the area south of Samaria, which lies between Galilee and Judea. The Jordan River runs from the north into and then out of the Sea of Galilee, then ends at the Dead Sea to the south. Within Judea were Jerusalem, Bethlehem to the south, and Bethany to the east.)

At the start of his ministry, Jesus approached John to be baptized in the Jordan River. At first John objected: "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" (Matthew 3:14). However, Jesus replied, "Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness" (v. 15). With that, John consented, and the moment after Jesus rose from the water, heaven opened, and the Spirit of God descended on Jesus. Gospel writers Matthew, Mark, and Luke reported that the Spirit alighted on Christ like a dove (Matthew 3:16; Mark 1:10; Luke 3:22). God was in this place—not only in the person of Jesus Christ but also through the voice of his Father—because they

all heard a voice from heaven: “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased” (Matthew 3:17).

Mark and Luke reported this incident almost exactly as Matthew did. However, instead of “*This* is my Son,” they wrote, “*You* are my Son” (Mark 1:11; Luke 3:22, emphasis added). No matter whether the word was *this* or *you*, clearly the Father was affirming Jesus in three ways: first, that Jesus was God’s son; second, that he loved Jesus; and lastly, that he was pleased with Jesus’ decision to submit to baptism. Jesus modeled baptism for all who would believe in him—an act of obedience that would represent a change of heart, “a sorrow for sin and a determination to lead a holy life.”¹ What we can learn from this first instance of the Father’s audibly spoken words is that one purpose of listening prayer can be to affirm a believer.

Listen Up

Another possible purpose for God’s speaking directly to us could be to get us to pay attention. After Jesus had taught and healed . . . and taught and healed, he began trying to explain to his disciples that the Jewish elders, chief priests, and teachers of the law were going to persecute him. Also, while he would be killed at their hand, he would resurrect from the dead on the third day (Matthew 16:21). However, little of this sunk in, apparently. In fact, Peter said, “Never, Lord! This shall never happen to you!” (v. 22). They still did not understand completely who Jesus was and his purpose on earth.

So Jesus taught some more, and then about a week later took Peter, James, and John up a high mountain to pray, and his appearance changed (Luke 9:28–29). Scripture uses the term *transfigured*, which in that context meant his “face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light” (Matthew 17:2), as bright “as a flash of lightning” (Luke 9:29). And then

two important figures of the Old Testament, Moses and Elijah, appeared and began talking with Jesus.

While all of this was transpiring, the disciples were a bit drowsy. Perhaps the climb up the mountain had fatigued them. Once fully awake, however, they saw their transfigured Messiah saying good-bye to the heaven-bound Moses and Elijah. Then the disciples were impressed! In fact, they were so impressed that Peter spoke without thinking—again: “Master, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah” (Luke 9:33). Scripture tells us that he did not know what he was saying—but we probably could have assumed that. Peter often spoke without forethought.

Then came the Rebekah-stop-talking moment. Even while Peter’s mouth was still in motion, a bright cloud surrounded them and a voice from the cloud said, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!” (Matthew 17:5). A slightly different version, “This is my Son, *whom I have chosen*; listen to him,” is recorded in Luke 9:35 (emphasis added). Though Christ had taught them that he was going to suffer, die, and resurrect from the dead, they were in denial. Though he had taken them up the mountain to reinforce this message, and though his body was transfigured into light, his key disciples still did not understand the seriousness of what lay ahead. Even if they had believed Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of the living God, they did not understand what the Messiah must do to bring salvation to man. It hadn’t even sunk in that Christ was the fulfillment of the law given to Moses and the fulfillment of the words of the prophets such as Elijah.

Peter wanted to set up tabernacle-type tents—one each for Moses, Elijah, and Jesus, as though Jesus were just another bearer of good news, not the finality of it. Peter may have thought he was acting as a wonderful host—providing shelter for the revered visitors. Peter, James, and John may also have been excited to think they would be part of the history of God’s

work on earth—the recipients of others’ praise in generations to come, such as they themselves had given Moses and Elijah. Things had not been going well. After all, by this point Jesus was the target of the Pharisees and other Jewish officials, who felt threatened by his growing following. Now, with the presence and seeming approval of Moses and Elijah, perhaps Peter, James, and John were seeing the potential of being in the cool group on campus, as opposed to the victims of the school bullies.

So it is at this very moment that the Father interrupted the wayward-thinking disciples. A bright cloud suddenly appeared, then enveloped them. This was no ordinary mist, as its presence frightened them when they entered it. The Greek *nephelē* for this word *cloud* gives some insight as to why the disciples were alarmed. This is a definitely shaped cloud, not a spattering of white wisps such as you might see from the window of an ascending airplane. This transfiguration cloud had a form to it, like the one that covered Israel when the Hebrews were crossing the Red Sea or those of John’s apocalyptic visions in Revelation.² If the transfiguration cloud were like the ones of Exodus times, there may have been accompanying thunder and lightning, as well as a trumpet blast. It could have been pillar-shaped, such as the protective, old-school GPS cloud that led the Israelites from Egypt.

But then seemingly that cloud *spoke*—imagine how that would amp up your anxiety—with the Father’s voice coming from it. *Listen to him*, the Father said. *This is my Son; listen to him. I love him; listen to him. I am pleased with what he is doing; listen to him.* In other words, *Stop talking . . . pay attention.* Just as a teacher might ask a student, “Did you just hear what I said?” the Father needed to interrupt the disciples’ off-track thinking to point them in the right direction. Their focus needed to be on Jesus.

After this dramatic scene, the disciples seemed to process better. They saw that Moses and Elijah had vanished, and

Jesus told them not to tell anyone what they had seen until the “Son of Man had risen from the dead” (Mark 9:9). They did keep the incident to themselves but discussed what he might have meant by “rising from the dead” (v. 10). Seemingly assessing the bigger picture, they asked Jesus why the teachers of the law were teaching that Elijah had to come first. Jesus responded,

“To be sure, Elijah does come first, and restores all things. Why then is it written that the Son of Man must suffer much and be rejected? But I tell you, Elijah has come, and they have done to him everything they wished, just as it is written about him.”

Mark 9:12–13

The Father had said, “Listen to him,” and Jesus’ response to their question provided more evidence that Jesus was, in fact, the Messiah, since John the Baptist was the prophet-in-the-wild/Elijah figure who effectively provided the forum for the Spirit’s anointing of Jesus after the physical act of baptism.

So this second example of listening prayer is again in a public forum, affirming Christ as the Son, but also clearly indicating to Peter, James, and John that they needed to listen to him. Similarly, God’s words to us today may be a listen-up message. We may be completely off track about a direction we are taking in our lives—such as with a job search or a relationship—and may need a voice-in-a-cloud pillar to shake us up, wake us up, and make us see the Truth that may be on the other side of our self-focused blinders.

The third example of Jesus’ hearing from his heavenly Father occurred closer to the Cross. It was the week of Passover. Great crowds of people who had come into Jerusalem for the Passover Feast had heard that Jesus also was on his way there. As he approached, the people ran out to meet him and laid palm branches for his tired, traveled feet to tread upon.

“Hosanna!” they cried. “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!” (John 12:13).

Actually, they were quoting a psalm: “O Lord, save us; O Lord, grant us success” (Psalm 118:25). *Hosanna* was a Hebrew cry for help: “Save, we pray.”³ They were happy to see this Jesus, who made the blind to see and the lame to walk. Maybe he would fix their problems, too.

John recorded the addition of “Blessed is the King of Israel!”

Everyone wanted to meet the miracle man, the one called king of the Jews. Some had heard about his raising Lazarus from the dead, just two miles east in Bethany. The crowds around Jesus annoyed the religious Pharisees to no end, the gist of their collective conversation being, “See, this is getting us nowhere. Look how the whole world has gone after him!” The crowd wasn’t calling *them* Lord. The crowd wasn’t gathering around *them* looking for a healer and teacher. The crowd wasn’t laying palm branches for *their* tired feet.

As a group of Greek worshipers came into Jerusalem, they, too, wanted to see Jesus. The attention and pressure certainly bore heavily upon him, and Jesus responded:

“The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. The man who loves his life will lose it, while the man who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honor the one who serves me.”

John 12:23–26

Say what? The disciples, the piqued Greeks, and the Feast crowds were probably all there, looking for the next miracle and listening for some clue as to who Jesus really was. They may have been expecting him to say, “Yes, I am the next and

final king of Israel. I am the prophesied Messiah. I am.” But instead, he spoke of seed and servanthood. Uncertainty and even confusion settled over the people, as Jesus continued,

“Now my heart is troubled, and what shall I say? ‘Father, save me from this hour’? No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour. Father, glorify your name!”

John 12:27–28

Jesus knew his time had come to provide a way for salvation to all who would believe in him. His purpose on earth was to point people to his heavenly Father. Thus, he prayed that the Father’s name be glorified.

For the third time we have a recorded response from the heavenly Father: “I have glorified it, and will glorify it again” (v. 28). And we don’t need to guess at the reason for these audible words from God, as Jesus explained this to the crowd, some of whom reported that the voice from heaven—no cloud this time—sounded like thunder or the voice of an angel. We all know what thunder sounds like—but the voice of an angel? In any case, we have an interpreter:

Jesus said, “This voice was for your benefit, not mine. Now is the time for judgment on this world; now the prince of this world will be driven out. But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself.”

John 12:30–32

The Father’s words were not for his Son’s “sake” (NASB), to bolster or affirm or encourage Jesus; they were to benefit those within hearing—to convince them that Jesus had the authority to call God his Father, that he indeed was God’s Son.

And how exactly did those sparse words benefit the disciples, Greeks, and crowd in general? When the Father thundered from

heaven with his words and when Jesus said those words were for them not him, the people took note. The crowd had been listening and had questions—important ones that could lead to faith and following. In response to Jesus’ statement “when I am lifted up,” they wanted to know how or why Jesus would say the Son of Man, the Christ—*ho Christos* in the Greek, “the anointed one”—would be lifted up, since they’d been taught he (the Messiah) would remain forever. There was an immediate follow-up question: “Who is this ‘Son of Man?’” (John 12:34). The puzzle of hundreds of years could be solved right then and there during that Passover Feast week. What a celebration that would be, indeed, if the carpenter from Nazareth, who was claiming he was the Son of Man, the Christ, the Messiah, proved to be the One for whom they had been waiting.

For those who can read through a metaphor, Jesus provided the answer.

“You are going to have the light just a little while longer. Walk while you have the light, before darkness overtakes you. The man who walks in the dark does not know where he is going. Put your trust in the light while you have it, so that you may become sons of light.”

John 12:35–36

People wait for signs of spiritual truth, but when they see them, they still don’t believe. Hundreds of miracles were performed (the town of Capernaum, for example, was denounced by Jesus for not repenting after the miracles worked there, Matthew 11:23 tells us), and yet people called for more. Jesus spoke at their level with stories pointing toward truth about eternity, but still there were questions. Even a voice of heaven for their benefit that would shake them to their very core was not enough.

Hearing from God

So what are we to do with this listening prayer? How do we get God’s feedback? Will he answer us? And if he did, would that be with an audible voice? Perhaps. In an old evangelical standard, *Prayer: Conversing with God*, author Rosalind Rinker contends, “Prayer is a dialogue between two persons who love each other.”²⁴ However, some would argue that the Bible does not teach that prayer is conversation. One scholar writes, “If we approach prayer as a verbal dialogue, we’ll no doubt be disappointed.”²⁵ Perhaps. However, we do see examples of conversation between God and man in the Bible. Adam, Cain, Noah, and Hagar talked *with* God—not just *at* him. Abraham negotiated for the city of Sodom in Genesis 18. Scripture records many conversations with Moses, including God’s call to Moses to lead the Israelites out of Egypt (Exodus 3–4).

And on the road to Damascus, Christian-hater Saul had a conversation with Jesus that led him to faith and changed his life. Some say that was then, but this is now. Perhaps—but if personal experience is evidence that God doesn’t speak, personal experience should also be valid to affirm that he does. While I’ve not heard audibly from God often, there have been at least two times in my life when he has spoken clearly to me. The words were so real to me that they could have been audible, but probably were just implanted within me.

The first time, I was attending a women’s retreat in the California Sierra Nevada at a church camp under the monstrous Ponderosa pines. As one session was ending, the speaker encouraged us to “find a rock, sit on it, and wait until God speaks.” While I was a bit skeptical, I found a rock and prayed something like, *Okay, God, I’m ready. Fire away.* I honestly think it was just a matter of minutes before I heard, *I want you to write for me.* Because that was such a surprise and because I really did

not know what it meant, I paid attention. What would it mean to write for God? Yes, I had a journalism degree, but I was not writing at the time and knew little of the Christian publishing industry. Within a year's time, however, I had attended three week-long Christian writers conferences and was beginning to sell articles to Christian magazines.

The other time I remember hearing God's voice, I was driving our four kids to my parents' house for the weekend. The whole three hours they were going nuts, teasing each other and continually asking me to stop for this and that. Two miles from my parents' home the youngest, Bethany, a toddler, kept saying, "Cows! Cows!" She had remembered there were dairy cows just beyond the upcoming intersection along the road in rural Sacramento. Though I said, "No, another day," the other three begged me to stop. "Just for a second, Mom. What would it hurt?" There was another voice I heard, too: *Stop*. None of the kids had said it, but it left such a strong impression, I quickly moved my foot from the accelerator to the brake as I approached the intersection. In the next instant, a car raced through the intersection from my right to the left. The other car had run the stop sign, and had I continued without braking, our car would have been T-boned with the probability of serious injury or even death for at least some of us.

While I am confident there have been other times God has spoken to me—somehow within my spirit—these are the only two instances I remember, the one different from the other. The first changed my career path significantly, and the second saved my children's lives. For the first I was quietly waiting to hear from him; the second time occurred in the midst of my children's chatter. Both were pay-attention situations. *Pay attention, Janet: Write for me. Go! Pay attention: Stop!* Had I shaken off either of those directions from the Lord, my life would be significantly different today.

How do we listen to God in prayer? Mother Teresa wrote,

In the silence of the heart God speaks. If you face God in prayer and silence, God will speak to you. Then you will know that you are nothing. It is only when you realize your nothingness, your emptiness, that God can fill you with Himself. Souls of prayer are souls of great silence.⁶

Listening to God pays off with clarity of direction and personal comfort, as Thomas à Kempis wrote centuries ago:

Blessed is the soul who hears the Lord speaking and receives the word of comfort from his mouth. Blessed are the ears that receive the echoes of the soft whisper of God and aren't distracted by the murmurings of the world. Truly blessed are the ears that listen—not to the sounds surrounding them—but to the voice of Truth inside.⁷

Like the disciples, we can get so wrapped up on earth that we fail to hear what heaven is saying to us. The lines of communication and openness to him are critical to receiving his direction. Whether we are sitting silently on a rock or rocking in a vanload of children, it seems that we will hear from God when we are dependent on him, when we recognize that his voice—whether it's *Stop!* or *Go!*—is essential for our very lives.

PRAYER FOR LISTENING TO GOD

Lord, your powerful and majestic voice is heard throughout the earth. You thunder over the earth, shaking the desert and twisting the oaks. My prayer is to you alone, Lord God. At just the right time and in the abundance of your steadfast love, I know you will answer me, because

you are good and faithful. Thank you, Lord, that you counsel me and instruct my heart. You are not far off but are always as near as my right hand. I know that I can call on you, because you not only will hear my prayer, but also will answer me. Lord, sometimes it feels as though you have forsaken me, because when I cry out, you do not answer. When trouble is near me, do not be far from me, as it seems as though there is no one to help me. There are other times, Lord, when I simply need a word from you that would point me in the right direction or stop me in my tracks for my own protection from a mistake or safety from harm. Father, please answer me when I am in distress, for I trust in the name of the Lord my God. I will listen to your voice because you are my life. Speak, Lord, for I, your servant, am listening. In Jesus' name, amen!

Adapted from Psalm 29:3–5, 7–8; 69:13; 16:7–8; 17:6; 20:1, 7; 22:1, 11; Deuteronomy 30:20; 1 Samuel 3:9

GROWING IN *Prayer*

1. Do you believe that God still speaks to believers today?
2. Read Matthew 3:17 and Mark 1:11. In the context of Jesus' baptism, what do you think the Father was trying to communicate to his Son?
3. Has there been a time in your life when you sensed God's affirmation of you? Explain the situation and how you felt.
4. At the Mount of Transfiguration the Father spoke and said, "This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!" (Mark 9:7). Why would God tell Peter, James, and John to listen to Jesus?

5. When would people need a pay-attention kind of message from God? Have you experienced a time in your life when you felt God gave you clear direction?
6. The third time an audible word from the Father is recorded in the gospels occurred when Jesus had returned to Jerusalem for the Passover Feast. When the Father spoke, Jesus said this was for the benefit of the others listening. What do you think he meant?
7. Is there a situation you are now going through for which you would like to hear directly from God? What kind of direction do you need?