

HERE I AM

*Responding When God
Calls Your Name*

BRITTANY RUST



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To the little one we lost this season—
you are forever held in our hearts,
and without a doubt,
your life impacted this world for good.
You are so loved, always and forever.

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And to you, the reader. You were in my heart with every word penned and prayer prayed over this book. This book is for God and for you. I pray with all my heart you will feel challenged and inspired to step out in faith and obedience with a “Here I am” spirit. With it, I truly believe there is no end to how God will use you.

INTRODUCTION

Here I am, Lord.” Little did I know when I read that phrase for the first time how much those four words would impact my life, take root deep in my soul and begin a personal spiritual awakening unlike any other.

Those four words, woven beautifully together, make up one of the most powerful phrases in Scripture. In fact, I would venture to say it is one of the most powerful phrases you or I could ever speak. But how is it that one small phrase can carry so much power? How could it radically alter your spiritual walk, igniting faith and courage, to a transformation unlike anything else? You will see!

This book will take you on a journey through your doubts, spiritual hiccups and fears to uncover what God truly wants to do in your life. It is a journey that will dive into the recesses of your soul and lead you to explore your gifts, call and purpose. God has so much He wants to do in and through you, but it takes more than just waiting for something to happen.

Living in the sweet spot of your spiritual giftings and flourishing in your God-ordained purpose involves self-discovery, honesty, pursuit of the truth, shedding the world’s distractions

and pursuing obedience through faith. It is more than sitting on the sidelines waiting. It is an active faith and pursuit of Him. It is walking in obedience and availability.

The Bible is full of men and women who took a step of obedience and stood firm in the face of adversity. It is full of men and women who took a stand for the cause of Christ. But there were six people in particular who exemplified what it looks like to be ready—six men who, when God called them to step out in faith, said the words, “Here I am,” and responded in eager obedience. Each demonstrated what it looks like to overcome obstacles and failure to get to the point of hearing God’s call and responding accordingly. Each had a bumpy road, but they show us what it looks like to overcome and try again. Each man was used to do something truly significant for the Kingdom of God as a result of uttering these three words, and history was made.

We are going to pull back the curtain on their lives and find out what made them tick. We will look at how they failed in their pursuit of righteousness, where and how God transformed their lives, and the significance of their “Here I am.” My prayer is that, as a result, you will find your voice and also say, “Here I am, Lord.”

However, it is not enough simply to tell the stories of these great pillars of faith and ask you to go and make your own without diving into how you can hear from God as well. The unfortunate truth is, in a world full of noises, so often people struggle to hear from God. I could inspire you with these stories and say, “Go get ’em!” but I would be doing you a disservice if I did not also help you uncover how to hear the voice of God in the first place. So, if you’ve always struggled to determine what is from God and what is not, to be confident if He is truly speaking to you, and to tune into His voice alone, then this book will give you valuable tools to get there. We are going to discover how to listen to God’s voice and be confident when He

speaks so that when He calls you, you can step out right away and flourish in your purpose. This journey begins, is sustained and ends with the voice of God beckoning you forward.

I truly believe with all my heart that God wants to show you how you can hear from Him and be a follower who is full of fierce faith and active obedience. You are holding this book in your hands for a reason, and if I were to guess why, I would say it is because God is wanting to fan into flame purpose and courage in your heart. He is ready to take you to the next level in your spiritual walk and use you like never before.

Are you ready? Are you open to this new chapter of courage and purpose God wants to write in your story? Then buckle your seat belt and let's go!

Part One

THE OBSTACLES WE FACE

THE NOISES IN OUR HEADS

The sun began to rise in the east, and as light poured out onto the cool land like a blanket of warmth, the young man began to wake. He could not have been more excited. Elisha was a great prophet in the country of Israel, and he was known for many miraculous deeds. The young servant could scarcely believe that he, of all the people in the land, had been given the privilege of serving this famous man of God. It was an honor, and it was with fierce determination that he set out to serve Elisha the best he could.

Each day he awoke ready to serve his new master with excellence, and this day was no different. But as he slowly trudged forward, removing the sleepiness from his heavy eyes, he was stopped in his tracks. Looking out over the city, he saw the formidable Syrian army, a great enemy, surrounding him and Elisha. Not quite sure what was happening, he straightened himself out in alarm and took one more look for clarity before running to his master.

“Alas, my master! What shall we do?” he exclaimed, trying to keep his composure while trembling with fear on the inside. It was to his surprise that his master responded so calmly not to fear. The enemy, Elisha said, was outnumbered. But how could they be outnumbered? It was but him and his master against an army! Elisha’s servant had not yet witnessed the incredible miracles he had heard so much about, and his immediate reaction in the dire situation was to fear.

Quickly the prophet Elisha began to pray, and behold, the servant instantly saw the most amazing thing his eyes had ever seen. In a split second a mountain full of horses and chariots of fire unlike anything on this earth appeared before him! With one prayer his eyes were opened to the spiritual battle that was playing out.

This account in 2 Kings 6 is a powerful reminder that there is an unseen battle in your life. If your eyes were to be opened like this servant’s, you would be astonished to your very core. This man witnessed a powerful victory provided only by God and experienced a newfound peace and trust in the Father. But the battle around you is not over.

Truth is, a war is raging all around you. Powers not of flesh but of spirit are battling for your attention, resources and soul. You might not always see it happening, but it is there in the shadows, where your eyes struggle to focus, that the greatest battles are taking place. External distractions fight to capture you, keeping you locked in a constant state of tension between good and evil. Unless you remain tuned in to the voice of the Lord, you will likely find yourself paralyzed with fear, like Elisha’s servant.

So, before exploring the “Here I am” of the Bible and what it looks like to step out in faith, you must first be able to determine which voice is God’s and which is not His. Noises surround you, but to step confidently into the calling God has placed on your life, you must first be able to separate God’s voice from

all the others. It is the only way you will hold fast to faith and peace when the battle gets close to home.

Elisha's mentor, Elijah, learned how to distinguish God's voice in a spectacular lesson, and we get a glimpse of that in 1 Kings 19:11–13, one of my favorite passages in the Bible.

And he said, "Go out and stand on the mount before the LORD." And behold, the LORD passed by, and a great and strong wind tore the mountains and broke in pieces the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind. And after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. And after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire the sound of a low whisper. And when Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his cloak and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. And behold, there came a voice to him and said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?"

Elijah was faced with great acts of God—the sort of shows of power and might that many of us would presume God would use to speak. Yet, His voice came only after these demonstrations. The truth is, while the world and the enemy shout to get your attention, you will find God in the personal and intimate voice of a whisper. Elijah had learned to separate the loud external distractions from the quiet whisper of his beautiful God. Through his experience we learn so much about what we must do to move forward in our own journey. When you discover how to do the same—to identify God's voice in the chaos—you will find what you are looking for.

If you are eager to pursue what God has called you to, or even looking to figure out what that might be, first cultivate the ability to tune out all the noises but God's voice. In this chapter we will explore three external distractions fighting for your attention: the world and culture, people and the enemy. As we look at them, consider closely if any of them sound

like a voice you listen to often. Gain insight into how these distractions are fighting to get between you and God, and how to combat them.

The World and Culture

This world and the culture we live in provide numerous distractions that easily entice us. These distractions have been there since the beginning of time. At first, when Adam and Eve were in the Garden, it was only them and God in perfect harmony and relationship. It was not until Satan enticed them to eat from the apple (which we will get to later) that worldly distractions first tempted humanity. At that point, when sin entered and forever changed the dynamics of our lives, the world's voice began to echo into the ears of men.

It was Adam and Eve's own sons who were first separated by this wedge. Genesis 4 tells us that Cain brought an offering of fruit to God, while his brother, Abel, brought the firstborn from their flock as an offering. God accepted Abel's sacrifice but refused his brother's. God's response was not so much about the physical offering they brought as it was the hearts behind their offering. Abel's heart was for God, but Cain's for the world. When Cain became angry at God's acceptance of Abel's offering over his, God spoke to Cain and told him that sin was crouching at the door and he had to rule over it. God was warning Cain that the world was after his heart and to fight any temptation to give in to its lure. Unfortunately, Cain did not listen to God and instead gave in to his own desires, killing his brother and separating himself from God. Cain's ego had been hurt as a result of the lies he chose to believe, and it cost him everything.

The world is summoning you to compromise, and it does so in a very sneaky way. Cloaked in promises that it knows what

is best for you, it will entice you in three ways: desire, self-promotion and comparison. Let's explore how each is calling for your attention, so that you will be able to stand firm against their temptations.

Desire

Whether or not we are aware of it, desire drives so much of what we do. Though desire is not inherently sinful, when it causes you to crave something you do not have to such a degree that you strive and toil for it in order to benefit yourself, it allows sin to take root. This sinful desire results in pride, and the pursuit of validation, power, money and lust—all of which beckon us to betray God for momentary gain.

As you read about these pitfalls, remain sensitive to see if one pokes at your heart. If so, it is likely a sign that you need to develop a battle plan for overcoming this distraction and finding victory over its grip. Only when you are free from it will you be able to hear the intimate whisper of the Father.

Pride

Pride is thinking of yourself more highly than you ought to, and it often manifests in placing yourself above others. Wasn't it pride that struck at Cain's heart? His brother's offering was accepted, and his was not. *Why should that be?* he must have wondered. *Don't I deserve God's acceptance as well?* These thoughts were proud, because Cain placed himself first and foremost. In fact, even when God warned him of the sin so close to his heart, he did not repent or feel guilty; he continued down the road of revenge.

It is often said that pride is the root of all sin, and indeed it may be. Every hurt, every desire, every pursuit is prey to pride because it puts yourself first. As Rick Warren wrote, "True humility is not thinking less of yourself; it is thinking of yourself less."¹ If

humility is less of yourself in the picture, then pride's voice sounds a lot like the word *me*. Pride gets you and me thinking we deserve the best and convinces us to seek after our own desires first.

Pride will call for your attention daily in the subtle and unseen moments. Giving in to it will only manifest in greater ways, and one day you will be looking at nothing but a life lived for self.

I have to admit I struggle with this more than anything perhaps. I was the oldest and only girl of a large family, and it seemed my life was devoted either to working at our family restaurant or watching one of my younger brothers. In high school I often had to give up social calls for the family. As a result, I developed a “what about me?” mentality. I worked hard, was responsible, loyal—and yet always seemed to be overlooked. This prideful attitude carried into ministry in my twenties, and it is something I have had to fight throughout adulthood.

If you find yourself struggling with a *me* mentality also, do not give up the fight. I know it is not easy, but you can gain the victory. I have found it helpful to use less *me* verbiage and more *others* verbiage. Start replacing thoughts of yourself with thoughts about God and other people. A common battle tactic: Ask yourself how you can serve another person in this situation instead of yourself. How can you put that person first? Finally, a verse I pray over myself often is Philippians 2:3–4: “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.” Renew your mind to consider others before yourself, and pride will lose a foothold in your life.

The Pursuit of Validation

Another desire is for validation, for the attention and admiration of others. Today's culture feeds into this with the instant

success that can be quickly gained through social media or reality television. Someone can be famous for just about anything, and it is something many strive for. Likes and comments have become a way to measure worth.

People pursuing this desire tend to think the admiration of others will somehow fill a hole in their heart. Did someone make you feel unloved or unwanted growing up, and now you struggle to love yourself as a result? Is it that you want to be known and loved by others, so seeking the admiration of many is your pursuit? Beware: The road to fame leads nowhere of value if it is the only pursuit.

Take Instagram or YouTube, for instance. These are wonderful tools for connecting with others, but they become empty vehicles of vanity if your use for them is self-promotion. This can be an easy trap, I know. There are times I have had to step back and ask, *Is this for Jesus or for me?* If it is the latter, I know it is time to take a break. If you are heavily involved with creating an online presence or striving to gain followers, ask yourself this same honest question. If your purpose is not to lift up the name of Christ so that others would draw near, it may be time for a social media fast.

Others do not determine your worth, dear reader. Christ has that all covered. So, if you are clamoring for the recognition or admiration of others, take a step away from the tool you use to gain this. Then, once you've had your heart check and have realigned yourself, continue to ask yourself on a regular basis, *Is this for Jesus, or is this for me?*

Power

Power, the pursuit of authority over others, is another voice that chants proudly in our culture. The longing to be over something or someone, to have control, have the last word, be respected and to establish one's dominion is a strong enticement

for many. This plays out everywhere from the world stage in politics and Fortune 500 companies to the private homes of married couples all over. Whatever the arena, the desire for power can have a devastating effect on relationships with God and people.

The thing about the pursuit of power is it often involves hurting others. It leaves hearts tattered and spirits crushed in its wake. Honestly, I do not think most people want to hurt others in their pursuit of gain; it is just that their desire to be recognized is simply misplaced.

If this is you, know there is hope for change. To get there, you must make one vital decision: release control to God. If you can learn to give control and power to Him, you will find He takes care of things much better than you can, and you will find incredible peace in this freedom. Pursue finding your importance in the Father, let go of control and feed kindness to those around you.

Money

Money is a strong enticement as well. We want the latest of everything and the best this world offers—comforts that can only be obtained through wealth. The lure of money beckons many to cut corners, railroad people and make unwise decisions for the sake of gain. Truth is, few things will show your priorities like your checkbook does.

I have a friend who once struggled with a shopping addiction for years. It locked her into a cage and drove her to hide the crippling debt from her husband for fear of his reaction. It all came out one night when she returned home from a work trip and found he had laid out her hidden credit card statements on the kitchen table.

Thankfully, my friend found both freedom from the addiction and the support she needed to overcome this pitfall. At

times she still feels the urge to spend what she does not have or to seek her worth in her clothes, but then she reminds herself of her identity in Christ and the commitment she made to serve her family, not her desires.

You can find satisfaction in the eternal. And you can overcome the enticement of money. Remember not to lose sight of what really matters in this world—people—and seek to collect memories, not things. Do this, and you will find at the end of life that it will be the relationships you fostered, experiences you collected and love you cultivated that will be your most cherished assets, not your possessions.

Lust

A quick survey of ancient and modern history will highlight one truth: Lust has brought some of the mightiest to their knees. In the Old Testament alone we see a few significant examples. David saw Bathsheba and had to have her, leading to adultery, murder and the loss of a child. Solomon had hundreds of wives and concubines, who only separated him from God. Samson lost his power due to the temptations of one woman.

Today, our society treats lust like a virtue. Open almost any magazine on the stand, turn on any television show or movie, or peruse the list of bestselling novels, and you will find sex. It is everywhere you look, unfortunately, and along with it lust calls out, seeking to capture your eyes and mind.

The cost of giving in to lust is high. Sex outside of marriage takes a piece of your heart, pornography hurts a relationship and an affair can destroy a family. Do not pay this price. Momentary satisfaction is never worth the cost of a lifetime of pain and regret. Do not let this desire bring you down like a building on fire.

Desire takes many forms, and the above are only a few. If you are longing for anything outside of what God offers you,

truth be told, you are hearing the whisper of the world. Tune it out—in fact, deny it—and seek the good fruit that God offers. Choose to walk in blessing and freedom, which will provide you with the ultimate joy!

Self-Promotion

The world will often tell you that you are most important. It is going to tell you to follow your heart and do what is best for you. You want that job? Do whatever it takes to get it. You want to divorce your spouse so that you can be with someone else? As long as it makes you happy. There are shows and movies dedicated to the dog-eat-dog world of advancement in the workplace, justifying self-promotion in the name of success. Self-help gurus, other religions, media—so much noise out there is directed toward convincing you to put yourself first and get ahead, whatever the cost or consequence.

This voice sounds a bit like pride and power, which we just explored. Self-promotion feeds these two. Perhaps it even serves as the introduction to pride and power, because isn't self-promotion about getting ahead anyway? It is all about you, even if it means others have to get hurt in the process.

This can be subtle. There are trains of thought that tell you to strive for holiness, but for your own sake, for your glory. Isaiah was talking about this misguidance when he said, “All our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment” (Isaiah 64:6). It is what Jesus meant when He called the Pharisees “whitewashed tombs” and told them, “You . . . outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness” (Matthew 23:27–28).

Self-promotion very much contradicts what Jesus did when He came to earth. He could have come, as many believed He would, as a king on a physical throne. They believed He would come and set up shop in Israel, then proceed to have all others

submit to His authority. But He did not do that, did He? Instead, He came to earth in obscurity and lived His first thirty years in relative normalcy as a carpenter. Even when He did begin His ministry, it was not with the grandeur of royalty. Jesus served others, plain and simple. He Himself said, “For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45).

When Jesus stepped into the public eye, He did so with a baptism. John the Baptist, His cousin, was preaching and baptizing hundreds when the Son of God walked up to the scene. Jesus could have asked John to step aside and used that platform—which, by the way, John would have gladly given over—as an opportunity to proclaim His authority, but He did not. Instead, standing by the very river He created, Jesus waited in line to be baptized by John. It is really incredible if you think about it.

John Eldredge paints the scene so vividly in his book *Beautiful Outlaw*:

Picture the scene in the movie *Gladiator*—typical to the inauguration of Roman emperors—where Commodus rides into Rome on a chariot like a conquering hero. Cheering mobs line the roads—paid to attend to make a good impression. Amid all the hollow pomp, the pompous fool gives a demure wave, feigning humble acceptance of the throne. It is appalling in its arrogance.

When Saddam Hussein was ousted from his dictatorship, a good deal of coverage was given to public places in Iraq. What I found particularly disgraceful were the massive idols he had erected in his honor. Murals and statues of Hussein the Magnificent were plastered all over the country—a handsome and dashing military hero, bold, a man for the people, forty years younger than he actually was. A demigod. Many dictators have done the same. Hitler did it; Chairman Mao too. It’s just creepy—the self-obsession, self-exaltation, the desire to be worshipped. Yet the only king who ever had a right to be

worshipped shows up riverside at somebody else's revival and waits his turn.²

Jesus was not about self-promotion, though He had every right to be. In this He gives us an example to follow—an example of what it looks like to serve others instead of pass others by.

Self-promotion has led many astray, and it will do that for you if you listen to its call. You have a choice to live for yourself and your own desires, or you can live for something much bigger. When you hear a *me*-centered voice within or get caught up in the allure of promotion, know this is a voice to reject and flee from. A good starting point in your escape: Do what Jesus did and serve others. Wait in line. Humble yourself for God's glory, not your own.

Comparison

Keeping up with the Joneses, or these days, the Kardashians, is a popular distraction. In fact, it has never been more popular or prevalent in our world as it is today with the media we have access to. The sad thing is, though comparison is so easy to fall into, at the same time it is one of the most destructive pitfalls. Comparison's ability to penetrate your consciousness and knock you off your path almost simultaneously is truly remarkable. Its voice calls loudest for the insecure, which I was for a long time.

I have watched comparison distract me, hurt me, discourage me and rob me of what God has put in front of me. I was made fun of quite a bit in junior high, and that only changed in high school because, to everyone's surprise, I made the dance team my freshman year. The mockery subsided, but it was still high school, and I was always comparing myself to the more popular girls. It did not end with school, either. In my early twenties

I often compared myself to the other young women in ministry. Every time another would succeed and I did not, I would inwardly wrestle with God, asking, “What about me?” I have had to fight over the years to shut out the voice of comparison and stay in the lane God has called me to.

Comparison will tell you that because someone else benefited, somehow you lost something. This is completely untrue. If you buy into this mentality, it will steer you off the course God has ordained you to follow. Christine Caine once shared a quote on Instagram that has impacted my thoughts on comparison so dramatically that I cannot help but look at it differently. She said, “Someone else’s success does not rob you of anything.” Instead of believing that another’s win is your loss, believe that God is big enough to do abundantly more than imagined in each person’s life! Make the choice to remember there is room for all of us at the table!

When you identify the voice of comparison and hear it calling your name, shut it down. Invite God into your mind, and embrace His idea of who you are—valuable. See yourself through His eyes and know that He cares deeply about you and your heart. Then, make the decision to celebrate others’ wins. Overcoming comparison means rejoicing with those who rejoice. It requires patience and a sound mind, but more than anything, it requires trust in God and a heart that is committed to Him.

People

People have incredible influence in our lives. The relationships we have with others can be our biggest blessings. Think about it. What are your favorite memories of time spent with family during your growing-up years? How have your spouse and children changed your life for the better? Was there a mentor, boss or co-worker who spoke into your life and lit the path to

the career or vocation God was calling you to? In a moment of deep turmoil, how did a close friend's support and counsel help bring healing to your heart and circumstances? The opinions, thoughts, advice and instruction of our friends and loved ones can change the course of our lives, even if we are not aware of it.

At the same time, relationships can also be our quickest downfall. Sometimes we give people more freedom to speak into our lives than we should. Think about some of the hard times you've had in life and what your first instinct was. For me, my immediate reaction has often been to call up my boyfriend or best friend. When trouble strikes, I often find myself craving the advice, insight or simple commiseration of those close to me. Perhaps you can relate to calling up a friend or running to a spouse the moment something got hard.

Conferring with your inner circle when you are going through tough times is not wrong, but God should always be your first point of contact, whether it is in the throes of an emergency or when you find yourself overwhelmed with gratitude. When you prioritize your relationships with others over your relationship with God, you have given people more of a foothold than you should. This imbalance will eventually have a negative effect on your life, even if the relationships and counsel you are turning to are healthy and sound.

Sometimes, however, the relationships we are drawn to are not healthy, and the counsel we receive is less than sound. There are many ways people can influence and impact your life in an unhealthy way, but there are two that are fairly common: peer pressure and people's hurt.

Peer Pressure

Peer pressure does not just happen in school and suddenly stop when you enter adulthood. Although perhaps more subtle

in later years, it still creeps into your life and encourages you to compromise. This may be most evident in a romantic relationship, when compromise—and its consequences—can be more extreme, but relationships in general produce pressure whether you realize it or not.

Any time someone is prompting or encouraging or manipulating you into doing something you inwardly feel is a compromise, shut it down fast. The longer you allow that person to speak such compromise into your life, the greater the foothold you give them to lead you astray.

This sounds extreme, but it is true. I have watched godly people fall fast and hard because they allowed the wrong person to speak into their life. A co-worker talked them into going to a bar for happy hour, and they wound up passed out on the sidewalk, or worse. A boyfriend or girlfriend invited them over to an empty apartment to watch a movie, and temptation got the best of them. A fellow worship volunteer of the opposite sex suggested carpooling to an event, and an affair started. I have witnessed all three of these things happen, and these are only the beginning of a long list of possibilities.

Perhaps one of the best stories in the Bible to illustrate the dangers of peer pressure comes from 1 Samuel 15. God directed King Saul to kill every Amalekite upon defeating them so that no trace of the wicked nation would be left behind. Instead of fulfilling what God had commanded, Saul spared the best of the livestock and the king of the Amalekites. When the prophet Samuel confronted Saul about what happened, the king responded, “I was afraid of the men and so I gave in to them.”

Did you catch what happened? Saul was so concerned with what his men thought of him that he became disobedient to God. It provides a powerful example of what the deep desire for men’s approval can lead to. Caring about what people think, particularly above what God thinks, can lead to disobedience.

When the words or actions of another beckon you to compromise, something inside of your heart will freeze. You will know the noise of peer pressure when you hear it. You will know it when your moral compass points in the opposite direction of what they suggest. Know that this noise is contrary to God, and shut it out. Walk away from what others would have you do to compromise your calling.

People Hurt People

Sometimes it is not the advice people give but what they do that negatively impacts you. Others' actions can inflict wounds that cripple you emotionally and make it hard to hear the voice of God. Your spouse or someone you are dating might break up with you, or a friend might betray you. Someone you trust or care about deeply might take advantage of you. In the midst of such turmoil, this pain can tempt you to turn away from God and toward the world—to substance abuse, sexual immorality, anything to numb the pain—for comfort and healing. But this is not what God has for any of us.

I am speaking from personal experience. People I have unwaveringly trusted have hurt me before, and it was no easy road back to healing and forgiveness. A heart shattered and soul wounded beckoned me to bitterness. And if I am completely honest, I have not always handled those hurts well. At times, I have allowed them to knock me off course, question God, lose hope in people and find a Band-Aid in the world's cupboard for a momentary fix.

I am not the only one, either. As a result of sharing my own testimony, I have had many reach out and share their own stories of betrayal. People hurt by those they cared about and now left in ruins. People wondering how they find restoration and the ability to forgive when so deeply wounded. Being in ministry, I have watched people pull away in isolation as a result

of people-inflicted wounds. They lose hope in humanity and turn to the world.

Perhaps people leave the biggest footprints in our lives. And because they affect us so, the betrayal experienced can be hard to come back from.

I want you to stop for a moment and take an inventory of your hurt. Is there any pain or scar tissue lingering as a result of not addressing the betrayal? Is there bitterness or unforgiveness attached to your heart? I would like to encourage you to do what you need to do to work through that hurt and find healing. Whether that is a verbal conversation with them, counseling or lots of prayer and worship, pursue reconciliation, at least in your heart. That kind of hurt can leave you immobile and lost if not properly dealt with. It can be a white noise that distracts and makes it hard to hear God's voice.

The Enemy

The Bible says that the enemy prowls around like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour, and that our battle is not of this world but against powers unseen. Every day Satan and his demons are out to separate us from God. Even Jesus experienced this in the forty days after His baptism.

So the question is, How do you identify the voice of the enemy? The answer: It is any voice that says anything contrary to God! James 1:13 tells us, "Let no one say when he is tempted, 'I am being tempted by God,' for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one." God does not tempt anyone. That role is reserved for the enemy.

Wasn't it Satan who tempted Adam and Eve? They had no desire to eat of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil until the serpent enticed them to eat from it. He had them questioning what God had said, even though they clearly knew God's

word on the matter. Satan made it enticing to sin, and it worked. Adam and Eve both took a bite, and sin entered the world.

Satan wants to get into your head and plant thoughts and suggestions that will propel you down a dangerous path or deter you from God. Sometimes—in fact, often—the enemy’s voice sounds a lot like your own. The judgment of another person passes through your mind. A beautiful woman or handsome man flirts with you, and you play into the conversation. You think about picking up a bottle of alcohol when things get tough, in spite of years of sobriety. If there is anything inside of you—a thought, inclination, feeling—that is contrary to God’s Word, then it must be of the enemy.

Sometimes it may be more subtle. The enemy may whisper, “Sleep in and stay home from church today. You’ve worked hard.” But then after you give in, it turns into a weekly habit. Or perhaps he convinces you to buy into the lie that being a good person is the path to heaven. “God loves everybody,” he might say. “Why would He allow a good person to go to hell just because they did not believe in Him?” There are so many ways the enemy tempts us—too numerous to list—which is why you must pay attention to your heart when your moral compass begins pointing in another direction.

Identifying the enemy as the source of these thoughts is the first significant step. The next is dealing with them.

How to Combat These Noises

Now that you can identify external distractions and those voices that run contrary to God’s Word, what do you do? How do you drown them out so that it is God’s voice alone you follow? The answer is really rather simple: Tune in to God’s voice! There are three things you can start doing today to cultivate this ability to listen to Him alone.

Read the Bible

There is no better way to identify the voice of God than to be in His Word. Reading the Bible is absolutely, hands down, the best way to learn what He is about, what He desires and how He approaches life! If you want to learn how to distinguish His voice among all the other voices, you must be in the Word as much as possible.

Did you know that people who read the Bible three times a week or less are no less likely to engage in sin than those who do not read the Bible at all? Research has shown that the magic number is four. If you can read the Bible at least four times a week, you are roughly 50–75 percent less likely to engage in sin.³ It is why being in the Word is so important. It is a tool to defeat the enemy in moments of temptation. It discerns what is right and wrong. It guides us into a flourishing life. And it brings us closer to Jesus. The Bible is God’s only definitive word. Second Timothy 3:16–17 (NLT) says,

All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful to teach us what is true and to make us realize what is wrong in our lives. It corrects us when we are wrong and teaches us to do what is right. God uses it to prepare and equip his people to do every good work.

Take time every day to read. Some days will be harder or busier than others, but at least get something in you. Download a Bible app on your phone and read the verse of the day when you wake up each morning. Take a chapter a day and dive into the lesson it has for you. I like to read a portion each day and find one thought I can meditate on until the next morning. You will learn so much about our mighty God, be impacted more than you imagine and grow a great deal through this practice.

The Bible is God’s definitive Word, and when you read it, you can know with certainty you are hearing from Him. Get His Word in you, and His voice will become much clearer.

Pray

Prayer is a conversation between you and God, plain and simple. It is not lofty words or deep, theological breakdowns; it is the unfiltered and vulnerable thoughts you share with Him.

When you spend time with God, coupled with studying Scripture, you learn a great deal about identifying His voice. How so? As you know, conversation is necessary for any relationship. It is how you learn about another, share your heart and cultivate intimacy. Through intimacy you recognize the voice and heart of another. I know my husband's voice when he is across a room full of people. I can instantly know which of my three brothers is on the phone just by hearing their simple "hello." It is because I have spent time with them and know them that I can identify their voices. Likewise, in prayer, you develop intimacy with God through communication.

When I was a teenager new to the faith, my youth pastor, Scotty Gibbons, would often say, "The battle is won in prayer." At the time, prayer was a foreign concept to me. It was amazing to me that I could talk to God, but I was not quite sure what that looked like. Was I supposed to be on bowed knees or pacing the floor? Was it silently, in my head, or loudly, with enthusiasm? Was it with my hands folded gently before me or with arms lifted high in surrender? It was not just these "hows" of prayer either; it was the when, where and frequency that left me confused.

Perhaps I should identify what prayer is not. Prayer is not simply

- a Get Out of Jail Free card,
- the last option when all else fails,
- something you do only when you need a request from God,
- a place to be disrespectful,

- or something to quickly pass over with a few rushed words.

E. M. Bounds wrote in *Purpose in Prayer*, “We can never get to know Him if we use the vehicle of prayer as we use the telephone—for a few words of hurried conversation. Intimacy requires development.”⁴

Prayer should not play second fiddle in your day, but instead be cherished as a priority. It is prayer that touches the throne of God. It is prayer that turns your situation upside down. It is prayer that changes things. I am able to stand by this because I have watched it play out time and again in my own life.

The Bible says in 1 Thessalonians 5:17 to “pray without ceasing.” Some may look at that and immediately be discouraged, because how is one supposed to pray without ceasing? I breathed a sigh of relief when I learned it did not mean to pray without stopping, but rather to cultivate a lifestyle of prayer. It means our days should be filled with instances of prayer, whether that is a devoted time in the morning, while you are sitting in your car, when a dilemma pops up or when you are about to have a meal. Prayer should be the natural outflow of a life surrendered to Christ.

So prompt yourself to pray, at every turn and silent moment, so that you form an intimate bond with your Creator.

Practice

The third thing you can do to cultivate an ear for God’s voice is to practice it. One thing we are going to find in our exploration of the “Here I am” phrases is that the people who said it failed quite a bit leading up to that definitive moment. They failed because they struggled to identify God’s voice among all the other noises. They listened to the wrong voice and, in that failure, learned what was not God’s voice. However, they

stepped out in other situations and ultimately discovered what God's voice was indeed.

You may shudder at thinking failure can be good. After all, we often fear failure, don't we? I am not saying that failure is preferable; however, there is no failure too big for God to redeem. It is a wonderful conduit for learning and growth if you will allow it to be. Failure will show you where to pivot and make a change. It does not mean you will sit at rock bottom forever. God sees you when you misstep, and He promises to be with you and to set your feet on solid ground when you are shaken. He will not abandon you, and if you will allow Him to speak into your life, He will use even your failures for good.

Practice honing your ability to hear His voice. When you feel a prompting in your spirit you think might be God, go for it! The more you step out in faith, the more you will feel comfortable with His voice. I have experienced this when I have felt prompted to go talk to a stranger or step out in a new endeavor, and although I heard many other contradictory voices, like fear and doubt, I stepped out to discover it was God all along!

When, like Elisha's servant, all you can see and hear are the sounds of the enemy's armies marching toward you, do not be afraid. Do not allow yourself to become disoriented or lose heart as a result of the noise from the adversary of your soul. Turn your ear to God. Listen for His voice. Listen for His peace. Lock on to His loving whispers. And then step out in faith and obedience, walking in the calling He has for your life.