

Exercises that Help You Listen

(Excerpt from Building Your Spiritual Core: 101 Creative Ways to Connect with God,
by Ron Parrish)

65. A Silent Retreat

Be still, and know that I am God! (Psalm 46:10)

Imagine a forty-eight period in which the only sound you hear is the sound of birds, leaves blowing in the wind, or the distant bark of a dog. Hard to imagine? You and nearly other human being alive in the 21st century can't relate to such stillness. TVs, radios, mp3 players, people talking, traffic noise, and a host of other clatter keep us from obeying this admonition: *Be still, and know that I am God!* (Psalm 46:10) Finding or creating this kind of space in one's life takes major intentionality for most of us, but experiencing God in silence and solitude is way worth the sacrifice.

Here's how I've done it:

1. Find a place where you can be alone for a weekend. Google "silent retreat" if you don't have friends with a lake house or mountain cabin. Often monasteries or church retreat centers are available for outside guests.
2. Be ruthless in your avoidance of noise-making devices. Let the only human voice you hear for 48 hours be that of your own talking or singing to God.
3. Lay aside games, novels, internet, and any other distractions.
4. Leave your computer and tablet at home unless you use them for reading the word or journaling.
5. Read large chunks of your Bible. Take walks out doors. Sleep as much as your body needs. It would be ideal to fast, but if you need to eat, eat simple meals alone.

6. Pray and ask the Holy Spirit to lead you to do 5-10 of the exercises found in this book during your retreat.
7. Journal what you hear and what you experience.
8. Ask “Father, what adjustments do I need to make in my life right now to experience more of your resurrection life?”

My experience with retreats like this: I never regret the time, energy, or expense it takes to unplug from the “matrix”. I often go with one agenda in mind (goals, schedule, etc.) only to find God has a different plan for our time together. One take-away from retreats like this is always: “I really want to schedule more of these.”

66. If God Were Speaking to Me ...

The God of the Bible is a God who loves to reveal himself. He’s a communicative God. But often we his people experience him as being silent. Perhaps that’s why most of our interaction with God is us doing all the talking. We need to cultivate a listening ear. This exercise helps to learn to hear God.

1. Find a comfortable sitting position in a room that is quiet where you are alone.
2. Take 10 to 20 minutes and express your sincere gratitude and adoration for God.
3. Now with the pen in hand is your prayer journal or piece of paper write: If God were speaking to me today he would say:..” (I use red ink here.)
4. Write what comes to mind. Don’t second-guess what you’re hearing. Don’t fear “making this up”. Just write out impressions of what the Father is speaking to you in first person in this moment.

5. Now respond to him according to what you heard.
6. If what you heard is weird or condemning submit it to your spouse or someone else in your Christian community for feedback.

My personal experience in listening: Honestly, the clearest, most profound things I hear from God come to me at times I least expect it. Out of the blue, rather than pen and prayer journal in hand. But when I still my soul and ask: “If you were speaking to me right now, what would you be saying?” There’s almost always an impression. I’ve noticed that most of what I hear has one of four themes:

1. His personal love and affirmation of me.
2. His encouragement for me to trust him. (quit worrying)
3. “Go for it. I am with you. Step out in faith” (don’t be afraid)
4. “Quit taking yourself so seriously.”

67. Discerning God’s Counsel in Our Decisions

You are controlled by the Spirit if you have the Spirit of God living in you. (And remember that those who do not have the Spirit of Christ living in them do not belong to him at all.) (Romans 8: 9)

We all experience situations where we need to make a decision and we wish that God would just give us a really clear sign from heaven. But at times, God seems silent. We know that he has given us his Spirit to lead us and give us wisdom, but it’s often not easy for us to *hear what he’s saying*. This exercise will help you discern the Spirit’s intimate counsel so we can make better decisions. But first there are basic assumptions about our hearts that you need to believe:

- The first is based on the above passage in Romans 8:9 – God’s Spirit is in us leading us to do the right thing.

- Secondly, from the same chapter, verse 15, this Spirit helps us relate to God as Abba (Daddy). We can “cry out to him” for his counsel and he’s eager to give it. (For those of us who are parents this makes total sense.)
- As his children, we are being lead by the Spirit to please him. (see verse 5)
- That leadership results in life and peace. (verse 6)

I think Ignatius got it right: “God, through his Spirit is present in the deepest core of our being,” he says. “Thus we can discern the will of God in our deepest desires.” The goal is to “sort through our superficial and fleeting desires and tap into deep, holy longings. God’s desires for us and our deepest desires are, in the end, not opposed but are one and the same” (The Ignatian Adventure). With this bedrock belief ...

1. Write down (or type out) exactly what the decision is that you are facing.
2. Honestly express your own inability to discern what’s best in the decision you are facing. Feel free to ask him why he seems so silent up until now.
3. Now read Romans 8 and highlight every verse that speaks to God’s (or the Spirit’s) help in this decision. Turn these verses into personal declarations of trust in his Spirit’s help.
4. Ask yourself the following questions and ask the Spirit to help you be completely honest. (He is, after all, the Spirit of Truth.)
 - What are the advantages and disadvantages of making choice A and B?
 - What are my true motives for each course of action?
 - What advice would I give someone else considering this same choice?
 - Which choice do I want to be part of the story I tell to my kids and grandkids some day?

- Imagine standing before the Lord (and we all will) and talking through what the decision you've made. Which does he seem to be smiling on?
5. If you were to give a percentage value of which choice A or B which do you want most in your heart of hearts after asking yourself the previous questions? If one is stronger ...
 6. Try it on. Act as if you have made the choice without telling anyone else your final decision for three days. Does it feel peaceful? God's peace will not prevail if you are making the wrong choice.
 7. Don't make a final decision until you have to. Take a day or three to fast. (The bigger the decision, the longer the fast.) Invite counsel from trusted friends and mentors. If you are married, go through this whole process with your spouse.
 8. Make your decision with great confidence and joy knowing God will redirect you if He's got a better plan.

On a Personal Note:

I could give several personal examples of huge life decisions where I went through the process listed above and still felt a measure of doubt and confusion. I don't think I have ever been even 80% sure about any decision except the one to marry Janine. But none of those decision do I regret now. God led. There has been one major decision I've made that within 24 hours of announcing my choice, God redirected me. I reversed my decision. It was embarrassing at the time but it gave me assurance that if we are sincere, the Spirit won't let us make the wrong choice.