

INTRODUCTION

A NEW, FAMILIAR VOICE

Thinking back to God's first words to me, they were not as kind as I would have scripted. . . .

I was thirteen years old, very awake in the dark of night, lying on the top bunk bed. My younger sister, still in elementary school, was tucked beneath her covers in the bunk below. Although I could only faintly hear her rhythmic breathing, her soundness of sleep emanated through her pale, freckled skin and pink sheets and up the very posts of the bed we shared. Lying anxious and alert, I was unable—or maybe unwilling—to let my eyes close.

I couldn't stop staring at an orange glow on the ceiling that had a bit of dance to its shadow. It was strangely warmer than the light normally put off by our little night light, as though it were a reflection from a flame. The inner voice that had narrated the first decade or so of my life was busy rambling, frustrated and confused because my dad asked me earlier that day if I was a Christian. He should know. He clapped when I received my Bible memorization trophies, and it was no secret I had asked Jesus to save me from my sins—well, to save me from hell—probably a few hundred times.

I stared at my hand in front of my face, fingers splayed open, and tried to see double. That usually helped me calm down.

If my dad didn't know, how could I know if I was a Christian? Everything I thought I was supposed to do, he had watched me do.

“You don't know Me.”

The words came suddenly, jolting my inner dialogue.

I thought immediately of a verse I had learned in Sunday school about people calling Jesus “Lord” and His saying, “I never knew you” (see Matthew 7:21–23). I knew a lot about Jesus and the Bible. I had studied Greek and Hebrew dictionaries before I owned my first lip gloss. How could I not know Him?

My father was an influential elder in a hyperlegalistic church that functioned more like a cult. The church called itself The Assembly. It prided itself on having many elders, not just one pastor. In reality it was one elder, my dad's best friend, who actually held all the power. He and my dad and another elder met to discuss the state of the church regularly, and that included the details of everyone's life. They arranged marriages, made college and career decisions, oversaw relationships with friends and family, and were also involved in the personal financial decisions of church members. There were no areas in which they did not have input. All of us were accountable to their peering eyes, and their wisdom carried the weight of divine appointment. The elders told us that God had entrusted them with all of our lives, like shepherds over His flock. God gave them His authority and guidance, and He spoke to them regularly. All we had to do was ask them what God said.

The elders were the interpreters of Scripture and the enforcers of the rules. Whenever the church was officially gathered, the women had to be completely silent unless they were joining to

sing a hymn. Women also needed to wear a veil, or head covering, as an outward symbol of their inward submission to the men and to God. The veil was worn at all church gatherings but also at home during personal devotion time. I had one made of ivory lace. Modesty was paramount, and I was taught from an early age how seductive my skin was. High necks as well as covered shoulders and knees were required at all times—and nothing clinging to the form of my body.

It slowly dawned on me in college that 99 percent of Christian women did not wear long skirts or head veils. Though I had been taught that we were the only “true believers” who honored Scripture instead of being swept up in worldly culture, I began to study the Bible more voraciously on my own. I went to a very conservative college, and most of the girls at my school also wore head coverings. The strict Assembly I went to was a small offshoot of an offshoot, but this college somehow gathered a couple hundred students with similar backgrounds from across the United States and Canada. It was within my first weeks away from home, when I was settling into my strictly all-female dorm, that I was given the wrong student work assignment that would supplement my tuition. Most freshmen got kitchen jobs, but by some strange fluke I was assigned a job usually reserved for seniors: I showed up for my first day as library proctor, the librarian’s assistant.

I can picture myself in that library, hiding behind the exposed pipes in an area off to the side where there was more space so I could pull tables together. I regularly abandoned the front reception desk where most of the other proctors would sit doing their homework. I stacked books upon books, some open to certain pages and turned over on other open books only to be anchored

down by a closed book I hadn't read yet on the top. Index cards stuck out of books, and a small stack of rejected books sat off to the side. The library was usually empty and always quiet, smells mixing from books, dust piled on untrafficked shelves, and the odor of a musty basement. I started wearing a bandana as a more fashionable, less obvious head covering.

It was when I pored over the worn pages of those aged books—commentaries on 1 Corinthians 11 and the end times—that my world came crashing in around me. Some published works documented what I had been taught, but most of my piles and stacks definitively disproved the theories I had been trained to defend. My dad was wrong. The elders were wrong. I was wrong. I started hyperventilating.

Through a special kind of grace, as my entire universe was spinning around me and beginning to crumble, I heard the echo of God's words to me years before: "You don't know Me."

And I realized God wasn't disowning me.

His words were an invitation, not an accusation.

He was inviting me into a freedom that I hadn't learned yet. When I first heard those words as a child, I had imagined being in a crowd and screaming out to Jesus, only to have Him look at me with narrow eyes and slowly say, "You don't know Me" before He turned to walk away. When these same words came back to me a decade later, I finally understood how Jesus was actually saying them. He was saying them softly, over and over, holding me tightly as I sobbed fearful, angry tears in that library. I still had a lot to learn about Him.

After college, I left our Assembly and was shut out of the lives of pretty much everyone I had ever known. My dad should have

taken a harder line to cut off his rebellious daughter (a term that had been reserved for my younger sister up to this point), but it turned out he loved me. And I loved him. That made everything infinitely more complicated, more painful, and more tolerable at the same time. Those last couple years—which we didn't know would be our last ones together—were actually pretty sweet. I would visit my parents' house for dinner and agree not to talk about anything but eggplant parmesan and good places to get a pedicure. Once or twice I could have sworn my dad was actually deeply proud of me. He died when I was twenty-five.

Over the next decade I searched for the Jesus I wanted to know. I looked in different denominations and at different authors and teachers. I found myself at a Presbyterian church in Menlo Park, learning from their new pastor, John Ortberg. He talked about a man he had learned a lot from named Dallas Willard, so I went to a local bookstore and found his book titled *Hearing God*. That was when I first realized that God was talking to me, straight to me, and I didn't need people who were more authoritative or famous or spiritual to tell me what He was saying. No middleman required, I could live my best life in God's company.

I didn't need the elders to tell me where God wanted me to go to school or whom I should marry; all of these decisions and all of life was now an adventure I could take with God. Surprisingly, it was harder than I thought not to have someone telling me what God wanted me to do. I discovered that the cultlike devotion that had been previously demanded of me was far easier for me to transfer to good pastors or celebrity Christians than I thought. It's convenient to hear "what God says" in social media one-liners or quotable taglines in the foreground of beautiful images—but He

has so much more to say to us! Gently, many times, God has reminded me that He isn't inviting me to follow good teachers and good churches, but that good teachers and good churches are at their best when they help me follow Him.

When Jesus invited the disciples to follow Him, He invited them to learn from Him, to eat with Him, to walk with Him, to listen to His stories and to tell Him theirs. He's inviting us to the same conversational relationship, the same way to know Him. Jesus tells His stories in lots of different ways and in many voices that we can hear if we're paying attention. And Jesus has left invisible Post-it Notes for you on the sunrise and throughout your

interrupted day. His words are waiting for you on the thin pages of your Bible, in the mouth of your child, and even in the song that comes on the loudspeaker at the grocery store. This book is about learning to recognize God's voice. About being awake to how God is already extending Himself toward us.

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Did you know that scientists believe the stars make sounds like instruments or singing? They are still learning how to listen for that sound through the vast space and dark vacuum between us and the distant lights. Because they now expect to hear something, they are listening and developing tools for greater awareness. My prayer is that as we listen together, the divine Voice would have its unharnessed role in our lives, singing wildly like the constellations of the night sky over a

desert. A voice that's always been there, that we are just beginning to hear.

Now when I hear God whisper, "You don't know Me," it sounds almost playful. He's inviting all of us to know Him better and experience Him more. God has words for His world, for His people, and just for you. His whispers are carried by His Spirit, riding on the wind, making themselves known to ears that hear. God has something to say. God is speaking to each of us, and all of us are able to hear Him.

PART ONE

LEARNING
TO LISTEN

NOTICING GOD'S WHISPERS

I didn't pack anything to go to the beach that morning. It had been a slow, blurry week with nothing but exhaustion and uncertainty over why little things felt so hard. I turned the key in the ignition and drove to meet God. I didn't tell Him I was coming, but Jesus promised that He always answers the door. I needed a getaway, some inspiration, some God-strength to get me through. Pulling out of the driveway, I had a thrilling rush, as if I were starting a yearlong journey around the world with nothing but the clothes on my back. My lips tightened into the sideways smirk they make when I am doing something unexpected and a little irresponsible.

The beach is just far enough away to be a trip, but still close enough to be a friend. As the road lengthened in my rearview mirror, I thought I could outrun my racing mind, but I am harder to get away from than I expected. Head buzzing with hypothetical conversations and unlikely situations and very real strategic plans to conquer the week ahead, I kept interrupting myself to announce, "Almost there now. The beach will clear my mind."

I opened the car door and stepped out into clean oxygen, bright sunshine, and the smell of salt. I wanted the fragrant breeze to blow its sticky wildness around every strand of my hair. *Hello, God. Here I am.* The sidewalk was peppered with stray sand as every step took me farther into the piercing blue sky, the skin-warming sun, and the spirit-soothing breeze. I laid my sweatshirt on the impressionable dune and sat down, sinking in. *Okay, God . . .*

I didn't actually have a plan, and it seemed a very normal day at the beach. I don't think I expected angels to greet me, but whatever I expected, this actual moment was not as spiritual as I had hoped it would be. . . . I don't like sitting down for very long, so I hopped up with a new idea: walking.

I tied my sweatshirt around my waist, picked up my sandals by their thin straps, and went down to the water where the sea-foam teases, then surges. Everything was beautiful, everything was right, but everything was still just a beach.

I started to question what I was even waiting for, what I was expecting, what it even means for God to "show up." I breathed, deeply. I even opened my arms up and lifted my sandals high above my head with a slow and exaggerated inhale. I sighed my breath out with a defeated exhale. My hands fell. *I'm not doing this right. Nothing's happening.*

I had been intentional about making time to be with God, but I couldn't get comfortable in the quiet of my escape. Pressure, fear, and fatigue were all still screaming at me, and everything inside my brain that kept me from connecting with God at home had followed me to the beach. I stared down the gorgeous coastline and tried to pray, catching myself again and again lost in my own wandering thoughts and distractions. I felt I was talking to the sky.

I was losing my train of thought . . . underwhelmed . . . hearing nothing but the wind in response.

That's when I lost my breath for a split second while staring at the surface of the ocean's gliding, piling waves. A rush of wind caught my imagination up in wondering what lies below and beyond the surface of those shimmering sunlight and blue-gray shadows. What all is going on in the ocean today? God told Job that He knows where sea monsters sleep.

I wondered how far away that underwater cave might be and if the mythic Leviathan was still there resting. *Give me a hint, God.*

My prayers were changing.

NASA says that we have better maps of the surface of the moon and Mars than we do of the ocean floor. God explained Himself to Job by owning the mysteries of

the ocean, and I let myself fall into those mysteries. Wrapped in wonder, I started to see Him too. *If He is truly present everywhere, even in undiscovered corners of the dark ocean floor, He must be present here with me now. Whether or not I can feel Him, whether or not I can focus my attention, He is here. If He knows where the Leviathan sleeps, He knows where His daughter stands.*

I finally heard God's voice whispering, a force pulling, from just beyond the scattered distractions that had slyly followed me to the beach. "Don't be afraid. I am with you."

That was it. One little catch of breath. One simple thought of involuntary worship. Awareness of my smallness giving me incredible respect for God's being. He hadn't finally ridden up on a wave like King Triton. Instead, He had patiently and kindly touched my

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eyes with salty grace for one moment, and I saw that my awareness of His presence had been too easily uncalibrated. He is mysterious and big, and He doesn't live at the beach. He is always present with me and usually closer and more available than I dare to imagine.

God, give me eyes to see. Ears that hear. A heart that never loses its sense of wonder.

Sacred space in the Old Testament, holy ground, was a place where God and humans met. Moments before the meeting, before shoes were taken off and bodies fell

flat before Him, holy ground was ordinary, dusty, rocky earth. But that is exactly where God meets us, right here in our world. On our dusty, rocky planet.

Our own skin, with all its susceptibility and strangeness, forms the walls of a sacred space—our very selves—where God meets humanity. Where God meets us.

A Samaritan woman met Jesus by a dusty well on the wrong side of the tracks in John 4. She asked Jesus which mountain to climb to meet with God. Jesus tenderly told her a shocking truth: one day soon everyone would worship God in

Spirit, not in a temple or on a mountain. The apostle Paul picked up Jesus's thought and explained that the holy, official place where the Divine interacted with humans—the temple—wasn't a place or a building anymore. Our very bodies are God's temple.

All of my chaos may have followed me to the beach, but so did all of my capacity to meet God just as I am. My body is a temple; your body is a temple if you have offered it to God. Our own skin, with all its susceptibility and strangeness, forms the walls of a sacred space—our very selves—where God meets humanity. Where

God meets us. Holy ground is under the soles of our feet always. God's Spirit isn't a pilgrimage away, or hovering distant and uninterested in a far corner of the universe, or in a vault that only special people have the code to unlock. If we belong to God, we carry His Spirit with us. Within us.

When I don't know what to pray and have almost forgotten that I am God's child, I hold on to that reality and this truth: I am not far from God, and He is not far from me. The space my body occupies is a meeting place with God. From the first days God created humans, He has walked and talked with us. It's what He loves to do. We were designed with the capacity to talk with God, because He's always intended to love us and be with us.

As much as the possibilities of intelligent design excite me, they can be incredibly intimidating. The camera store in our neighborhood had a vendor fair around the time I was thinking of buying a camera. All of the big companies had banners with their logos hanging over the front of tables covered with black tablecloths and manned by sales reps. Spread out on the table were different lenses and filters and various parts scattered between them. One of the reps was all smiles as he called out for me to come see one of his cameras. He gingerly passed it to me, and my hands fumbled. "Oh, wow. I didn't realize cameras were so heavy."

He explained to me how the camera was built and the internal lenses and something about shutter speed and light. I didn't want to interrupt him—he was really on a roll—but when he flipped the camera around to show me how to change the aperture and other settings, I finally came clean.

"Look, I'm not a photographer. I just want a camera that won't take blurry pictures. Do you have one with a good auto mode?"

He blinked at me three times and smiled with his eyes wide as if he was about to say something obvious: “If you want pictures that aren’t blurry, you should learn to use the settings.”

That sounded complicated, so I thanked him and went to the next table. But I kept thinking about what he said.

You see, we’re all living in these temple bodies that are capable of hearing God and talking to Him. Like my camera and me, though, most of us leave our fullest capabilities to the experts. We don’t know where to start because we don’t understand all of the factors and settings. Overwhelmed, we can’t imagine how minor adjustments will make that much of a difference anyway. Not to mention, I’m a little lazy.

Yet God’s intention from the very beginning—evident in the first days of Eden—was to be in conversational relationship with humans. He didn’t abandon that goal after our rebellion. He made promises, vows, and covenants to rescue and restore humans to their design, with the intention of us being with Him and hearing His voice.

With the Bible so adamantly insisting that God is speaking to us, and always has been, why do so few of us recognize God’s voice in our daily lives?

Learning to listen is about noticing all the things God is already saying to us that we may not be hearing. Listening can be just as valuable as hearing. We may find different spiritual seasons of our life dominated more by hearing or by listening. Even when we can’t hear God, we can lean forward and try to notice and listen. We’ll learn that silence is part of the ongoing conversation between God and man, with its own purpose. Our engagement with God is what matters. Whether we are in the depths of doubt or enjoying

a keen awareness of His voice, the goal of listening is not simply to hear God's words but to move closer to Him.

How we view ourselves also matters to our relationship with God. It is difficult to notice God when we are occupied with numbing our emotions or pain. In her book *The Gifts of Imperfection*, Brené Brown points out, "We cannot selectively numb emotions. When we numb the painful emotions, we also numb the positive emotions." The same low points that send us seeking after God's comforting voice can prompt us to unhealthy comforts as well. Dysfunctional relationships, shopping, food, alcohol, technology, and other distractions not only keep us busy and a little satisfied, but they also keep us completely stuck.

Sometimes, without realizing it, we get in our own way of hearing God's voice. Once we know what to listen for, we can get ready to listen. When the Bible talks about eyes that see God and ears that hear God, those abilities are linked to our heart (Isaiah 6:10; John 12:39–41). We find it difficult to hear God's voice when we allow bitterness, unforgiveness, or anger to slowly harden our hearts. In Matthew 5:23–24 Jesus taught that if we are angry with someone or if someone is angry with us, it's better to leave our sacrifice at the base of the altar, go to be reconciled, then come back to worship God. If we feel awkward in our conversation with God, we can also take inventory of our relationships with other people. Our hardness toward other people can harden our heart to God.

Learning to listen is about noticing all the things God is already saying to us that we may not be hearing. Listening can be just as valuable as hearing.

You may not think you've heard from God lately, but you may not have known what to listen for. When we think about hearing God's voice, our first picture can be something like clouds parting, total clarity, and an audible voice that thunders something important. God can speak like that, but that's not His only voice. Burning bushes and clouds of fire have held the voice of God, but so have whispers and silently overflowing jars of oil.

God loves to break into our ordinary. He loves to meet us where we are, as we are. He loves to join us on our favorite couch early in the morning as we pore over His Words, or sing softly to Him in the kitchen during the day, or toss restlessly in our bed at night. Conversation with God is not merely an exchange of words or receiving directions; it's an ongoing conversation that develops intimacy and connection.

Have you ever been driving, worried sick about something, and then had your breath taken away by the sunset? God loves to remind us of how big He and His world are so we can gain perspective on our problems.

Have you ever seen someone and just known you were supposed to talk to him or her? God nudges us toward one another.

Have you ever come across words in the Bible or on a billboard and felt as though they were put there for you, for that exact moment? God leaves us notes in the most surprising places.

You can hear God. You probably already have.

Even when we clearly hear God's voice, it can be difficult to own that truth for ourselves. It's hard to trust the voice of God when so many who hear God speak hear Him say the strangest things or think everything they encounter is God's affirmation of their own plans. I know a man who claimed God told him to leave

his wife and children for another woman, a soul mate whom God had designed just for him. I listened to an interview with a Nazi who was an active member in the Ku Klux Klan, and he quoted Scripture—God’s own words—cherry-picked and misinterpreted to justify his hate, racism, and violence. Self-delusion loves divine approval.

The only thing worse than a church of people who hear God say crazy things is a church of people who aren’t listening for His voice at all.

So we walk toward this holy conversation with God knowing that our self-deception follows us like a shadow. Still, we cannot opt out. If we say we follow Jesus, we have to follow Him. We have to have a relationship with Him that goes beyond transactional morality and that more closely mirrors how He wants to relate to us: as a brother (Hebrews 2:11), a friend (John 15:15), and even a newlywed (2 Corinthians 11:2). No relationship can thrive without communication, and our relationship with God is no different.

Now, I’d love to say that I’ve never put words in God’s mouth or chosen to misunderstand what He was saying, but I’ve done both. It’s hard when God isn’t saying what I want to hear. During my career transition from a high-tech company into motherhood, for instance, I hit a point where I was desperate to know what was next. I couldn’t tell if my break from the workforce was temporary or if God was leading me through this big transition into new territory. I had left a job that I loved: amazing coworkers, meaningful work, and the invigorating sense that I brought unique value to our team.

Still, here I was, obeying what I thought was God’s voice directing me to take a break—and I was miserable. I loved my baby, but I was battling depression and utterly humbled by how hard it was

to be a mom at home. Not only was it mentally difficult to be in such a thankless and unseen role, but it felt physically impossible to feed my child and keep my house clean—and don't even talk to me about the gym. I had always been a competent achiever in school and work, but motherhood kicked my tail. I prayed every day for weeks about going back to work. Hearing nothing but silence in response, I reluctantly took the advice of a trusted mentor and obeyed the last clear thing I had heard from God: stay at home. I knew I had a lot to be thankful for, and I grudgingly believed—but see clearly now—that God had good things for me in that time.

One day, as I stared into the blank slate of my future, I thought I heard a whisper from God: “Liz, you're not going to teach executives anymore. I want you to teach My people.”

I was desperate for new direction, but this had been such a subtle thought in my mind. I wasn't sure if it was God. I asked Him to repeat Himself.

“Was that You?”

Silence.

“Where do I start?”

Silence.

“What exactly am I supposed to do?”

Silence.

Over the next three months, I would wholeheartedly seek God. I prayed. I read my Bible. I asked Him over and over to clarify His words. I looked for opportunities that might be His leading me toward this new thing. I asked the church if they needed help.

Silence.

In my next meeting with my spiritual director, I earnestly described to her how God was teasing and eluding me. I asked if she

thought I had heard Him wrong. Or if that was a call on my life, was it for now or for ten years from now? I leaned forward and asked so many questions, not even realizing I wasn't waiting for her to answer a single one.

She took a deep breath.

"Liz, I don't think God is hiding from you. He just isn't where you are looking."

I was confused, and she sensed it. She smiled gently as she asked kindly, "Are you looking for God, or are you looking for answers?"

For the first time that morning, I was silent. My motives always surprise me. It's possible to seek God's voice but not seek God. We won't find Him if we are moving toward our own goals and desires and trying to see Him there. God is who He is, and if we want to hear Him, we have to come to Him in our own broken desire to love Him. Listening should be an act of love, not a grasp for certainty. We have to move only toward Him and His love, not toward His wisdom or blessing or direction.

As I moved toward God during that silent, uncertain season of my life, I didn't make any progress toward what I thought my new calling would be. His silence about my calling directed me to other words He had for me. I ended up needing to take a healing journey before I went on a purpose-seeking adventure. God was so kind, so good, but so direct. I had anger that was covering deep pain. I had pride that had grown into arrogance and insecurity. I had developed unhealthy relationships with food in my quest for comfort and escape. None of this was fun to work through.

Sometimes freedom feels harder than addiction. The call that I thought I may have heard—the plan I wondered if God had for my

future—wasn't my direction or my goal for those years. The plan I'd heard earlier became a little gift of grace I held close, a sweet promise that no matter how hard my mess was to deal with, I knew God wasn't done with me yet.

Thankfully, the truth is that if I—if we—have to be in a healthy place before we hear God, we might never hear Him. God has never asked us to clean ourselves up before we come to Him—He knows us too well. He breaks through the silence even when

we are in no place to hear Him. One of the clearest encounters with the loudest auditory voice of God in the New Testament was when Saul (who would later become Paul) was on the road to Damascus. He was a Jesus-persecutor. He hunted down Christians to torture and kill them. He could not have been more tuned out, but God broke through.

It's not the holy ones or the artistic ones or the ones with healthy childhoods who hear the birds sing; it's the listeners who hear. You can hear and see and understand more than you know.

I also would have never heard God's voice if I had to be calm or attentive or humble or patient, because I was none of those things. Those things help us grow

into an ongoing conversation and awareness of God's constant presence in our world, but do not be intimidated if they feel unattainable right now. You learn as you practice, but even a child can learn to take a picture with a complex camera.

Once you learn to notice the things in your day that are easy to ignore, you'll notice them more and more. As you learn to recognize what is truly from God and learn how to respond to His goodness and invitations, His voice will shape your life. There is a

world of color and smell and sensation waiting to be discovered. It's the world we live in but didn't realize was there. It's not the holy ones or the artistic ones or the ones with healthy childhoods who hear the birds sing; it's the listeners who hear. You can hear and see and understand more than you know. It's a way to live life richly, and it often plays out in the simplest of pleasures. The most ordinary days and thoughts and moments.

God has been walking and talking with humans since the very beginning, and He is still with us—still speaking to us—today. Eden was originally a refuge from chaos, but chaos was invited back in with that first sin and wrapped its dark tendrils around so much of human existence. Underneath that darkness, under the soot of grief and confusion, God's original design is beckoning us. We aren't just capable of talking with God; we were meant to live our lives with Him. On this crazy planet, we can discover God's fingerprints and holy spaces at every turn, where traces of divine love glimmer in the wildest places.

LISTENING FOR GOD'S VOICE

Consider taking time to process your own journey in a journal. Share with a friend who is a good listener—and listen to their story too.

1. Have you ever been aware of God's voice or presence?
What was it like?
2. What do you think God is like, based on your interactions with Him?
3. What do you do when you want to listen for God's voice?
4. On average, how many times during the day do you notice God? What about you, your emotions, your day do you think might change if you noticed Him more?

RECOGNIZING GOD'S EXPRESSIONS

My dad was dying. For weeks he lay in the center of his living room. There was no bedroom downstairs in my parents' house, so the couch was pushed aside when the hospital bed was brought in, and we all walked past him on our way to get a cup of water or to go to the bathroom. The cancer had been so cruel, but now it was hard to tell if the radiation had been worse. We tried to be casual, tried to pretend we were having a normal conversation with him, as we assessed his decline. But we were too panicked and our voices were too hushed. Once he even rolled his eyes at me.

The air was thick: a thundercloud of grief had already begun descending. It had filled the upstairs where we all hid when we cried, but it was seeping through the floorboards and coming through the ceiling of the living room where Dad was. We were supposed to be strong when we were downstairs. We were supposed to hang on tight and remember every moment of these last days, but we all just wanted to run straight into that thundercloud

and be angry and scream and give in to the freedom of collapsing. How were we supposed to treasure this time with him? It was impossible to pretend that we were making memories as we watched his body decay. From the moment of his diagnosis, the brain cancer had taken away his ability to speak coherently, and now he barely made sounds at all. We all sat in the pain of words unsaid and apologies we could no longer expect. It was nothing compared to the intense agony he wore on his face. We held back our resentment and grief with thin smiles as we placed straws between his lips and pleaded with him to drink.

It was early in the evening, and I was in the kitchen opening cupboards and closing them for a reason even I had forgotten. I noticed people walking to the living room, silently, one by one, from all corners of the house. No one said anything. I turned and felt it too. We were all around Dad now, our hands lightly touching the blanket that covered his legs. He didn't look different, he wasn't breathing differently, but something was entirely different. His eyes were closed, and I studied him. He breathed out, slowly, quietly, and he was gone. My eyes scanned from his head to his toes, and there was something strange about his stillness that I can't name, the almost imperceptible difference between sleep and death. On both sides of his bed, all of our hands were still resting on him. An image rushed my memory as I recalled the story of a paralyzed man whose friends had brought him to Jesus. They held on to the sides of his bed and carried him so he could be made whole. When they could not break through the crowd, they tore a hole in the roof and lowered him through the ceiling. I gripped the edge of his hospital blanket tightly. I had just held the side of the bed my dad was lying on when he met Jesus. When his wholeness was restored.

I had always believed people have souls and that these souls live on outside the body after death, waiting for a more complete resurrection. But this belief didn't prepare me for that day, the precise moment, when I saw a body with a soul suddenly be without it. I have never seen a soul as clearly as I did when I was watching that body. The separation of spiritual and physical came completely undone for me. All of our physical see-and-touch world is animated by spiritual realities. I can never unlearn that.

In *Hearing God*, Dallas Willard refers to “the overwhelming presence of the visible world” as one of our greatest barriers to hearing God's voice. The invisibility of the spiritual world invites distrust, so placing too much importance on it feels like a special form of insanity. We all know someone who spiritualizes everything, and the danger of that is obvious, but the danger of spiritualizing nothing is just as real. It's far too easy to forget that we don't live in our own little visible world of commuting and deadlines and relationships and favorite coffee places. We exist in a vast and interconnected world of people and things and places where both heaven and hell come dangerously close to the muddy ground of earth.

We can expect holy moments in living rooms just as often as in church. Over the years as my arms ravaged through darkness for the nearness of God, my fingertips have felt something slide past me, like a dolphin's wet skin, too slippery to grasp. Occasionally, though, my whole fist has grabbed onto something solid and secure. Just as God is “I AM who I AM,” His holiness will be what it will be.

The invisibility of the spiritual world invites distrust, so placing too much importance on it feels like a special form of insanity.

We don't always have words for these sacred secrets. And too few people can bridle suspicion and listen with curiosity about our God glances. Even we ourselves hold them lightly and without enough confidence.

We don't always know if it was God's voice we heard. Are we so vain as to think He speaks to us? As Willard further observes in *Hearing God*, "God's spiritual invasions into human life seem, by their very gentleness, to invite us to explain them away."

Yet God is still speaking. He hasn't abandoned His story. He is still actively present and moving in our world. Every story has an arc: a beginning, a middle, and an end. In the beginning God created order and life out of chaos and desolation. Then He walked with humans, taught them how to care for their world, and gave them leadership and stewardship of the earth. God loved these two humans, knew them, and let them know Him. One day the humans decided they didn't need God, His rules, or His advice. They decided they could make their own rules.

This rebellion is sometimes blamed on a woman and a snake, but it has played out a million times in a million ways since then. The "I don't need God's way; I will do it my way" decision is in no way isolated to an ancient garden. Unfortunately, our way never ends well. Each of us has been affected by the bad choices of others; and if we are being very honest, we realize that we, too, have hurt others and our earth in irrevocable ways.

Our world is a broken place that isn't as it should be. But what about this God? Where did He go after the humans rebelled? He stayed. His presence is seamlessly continued in the story after the garden. He gives humanity gifts and opportunities, and He listens to our cries. He begins the central plot struggle—God's reckless,

repeated attempts to remake and redeem the story. His all-out pursuit to rescue the people He loves, who don't always want to be rescued. This story that we find ourselves in now is not our quest to find God, but His quest to be found by us.

Jesus left all of heaven to embody God's stop-at-nothing determination to be with us, to love us. Jesus didn't come to condemn us; He came to give us life. To be the ransom that could reunite us with God. And Jesus is coming back again to set everything right.

The bad choices, hatred, racism, violence, and self-centeredness that have nearly destroyed us and our planet are called sin. Sin ruined everything. Christ made change possible. Repentance turns us in the opposite direction as we say, "Not my way, God's way" instead of what comes more naturally to us, "Not God's way! My way." God saved us from our self-destruction so He could be with us. We don't have to wait until we get to heaven; God wants to be with us now, and He is inviting us to enter the story He is still writing here on earth.

In other words, eternal life with God starts now.

Although He has many voices and many names, there is only one God and one storyline. He calls Himself "I AM who I AM." A friend of mine loves this name because it means that God is exactly who He is, authentic and truly Himself in every situation. And I love the invitation of the name. When God says, "I'm Me," He invites us to discover more of the infinite nature of who He is in the context of our ongoing relationship with Him. God calls Himself "I AM," and we call Him Healer, Provider, Love, Peace,

This story that we find ourselves in now is not our quest to find God, but His quest to be found by us.

Victory, Wisdom, Almighty, Father, Jesus, Brother, Friend, and more names as we discover more of who He is.

This is the story we find ourselves in.

So if we believe that God is who He says He is and that He has plans for the world we live in, it would make no sense for Him to be silent now. God did not leave His Holy Spirit on earth like a watchful Elf on the Shelf. His Spirit is full of power, encouragement, and guidance for His people. For us. For today. Our world is full of the spiritual realities of good and evil that are in constant conflict. The greatest spiritual reality is that God is with us as He always has been.

Of course God is speaking to you. He has been trying to tell you all along who He is, who you are, what you are made for. He has a story He is writing just for you. It's part of His larger story, and He has designed you for a part only you can play. As you navigate your part in God's plan, He has things He'll need to talk to you about.

So how can we really know which words are God's? How do we distinguish between His words and our own thoughts? It's not always easy to tell the difference between the voice of God and other thoughts that bombard us.

Dallas Willard calls out three ways to recognize God's voice: "What we discern when we learn to recognize God's voice in our heart is a certain *weight or force*, a certain *spirit*, and a certain *content* in the thoughts that come in God's communications to us" (*Hearing God*). God's confirmation, Willard teaches, comes through a distinctive spiritual element of God's glory, the Holy Spirit, and Scripture—three lights that can guide us.

God's voice is marked by *His glory*. It's not always a blindingly

radiant glory, but it is His unique glory that stands apart. The Greek and Hebrew words used in the Bible to describe God's glory are associated with either weightiness or a shining radiance. We can learn to recognize both the moments God weighs in with His presence and the things that shimmer with His glory.

It's okay to be unsure. Many times something catches me by surprise—an unexpected message, a strong thought, or a song on the radio—and I'm not sure if it's God speaking. The ability to recognize God's plans, words, and actions is called discernment. Sometimes that discernment process has just as much value as the message itself.

There is a story of a young boy named Samuel who heard God but hadn't yet learned to recognize His voice. He lived in the temple, and one night he heard someone calling his name in the night. Immediately, he assumed it was the high priest, Eli. When he went to Eli to see what he wanted, Eli told him, "Go and lie down, and if he calls you, say, 'Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening'" (1 Samuel 3:9). When something strikes me as a potential word from the Lord, I think of it as that voice Samuel heard. Not sure where the voice is coming from, I simply respond prayerfully, "Lord, I'm listening." Just as in the story of Samuel, God will often speak again, and it will more clearly be His voice. Confirmation is an important part of discernment.

The more we hear God call our name, the more we will confidently recognize His distinctive tone of voice. His voice is strong, confident, and sure. The waves and wind obey. It's rarely flowery, but always gentle. Disarming even the most defensive; assuring the fearful. Maybe convicting; never condemning. We learn the tone of God's voice through experience, and by becoming familiar with

the words of Jesus in the Gospels. Time, experience, patience, and failure are all important teachers when it comes to recognizing God's tone of voice.

The *Holy Spirit* has creative ways of tapping our shoulder. If we are only listening for God to speak to us in audible words, we will miss most of what He has to say. God speaks to us in many ways, and we learn to recognize the weight or grip a certain word or image has on us. Sometimes the Holy Spirit may speak to us through the simplest images or circumstances. Like walking in the grass.

I was on a walk with my children, and as they ran ahead of me, I was praying through some serious self-doubt. I was working on a project that was beginning to feel unimportant, and my original creative vision of something interesting and world changing was fading fast. So was my enthusiasm. I had already been walking for about a mile on this trail when God suddenly and very sharply drew my attention to the grass. I'd walked past millions of blades

of grass already, but I saw the blades in front of me very differently. I felt the Lord telling me that even though everyone comments on the flowers, He still loved creating the grass. Every piece of grass is beautiful, valued, and important in all of its ordinariness.

This creative task He had given me was more like grass than wildflowers. It might fade into the background, but that ordinary grass fills our world with gorgeous shades of green. God created the grass, and He

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was asking me to create something ordinary too. The weight of the image, and the fact that I had never thought of anything like that before, helped me recognize God's voice. I was able to finish my project strong, and I've had a new appreciation since then for "ordinary creation"—if there is such a thing.

The *content* of the message can also reveal the messenger. What God says is always consistent with His values, character, and directions that are clearly expressed in the Bible. God does not tell you that you should take that thing from work because you are underpaid: He already told you not to steal. God does not tell you that someone other than your spouse is your soul mate: He already told you that marriage is a promise. If you aren't familiar with God's way of life revealed in the Bible, or how it applies today, you can always ask a trusted mentor or pastor. Wise people are very helpful with discerning God's guidance. They can weigh in with their own experience and a more objective point of view. It's worth investing in relationships with mature people who care about you and who have a long track record of prayerfully listening to God themselves.

Our confidence in God's voice grows the more we listen. Sometimes clarity comes as a complete gift of grace, but we will have more certainty in God's direction the more we intentionally listen to Him every day. Especially when we don't have any agenda other than hearing whatever God has to say. If we only listen for God's voice to give us answers for specific decisions or areas of life, we'll quickly find that He doesn't work like a Magic 8-Ball. Learning to recognize God's voice isn't a search for answers; it's a process of learning who God is, what He is like, and the kinds of things He has to say. God speaks to us like a mother coos over her baby, so her child will not only know her voice but also know

her love. The more we listen, the more God's words will reveal His heart to us.

At times, we long for that connection and His embrace, but instead God's guidance and presence feel more like silence, which can be painful and confusing. Silence is not proof of distance or abandonment. Silence is one of God's many voices that can direct us, and we can learn to recognize Him even in the dark.

God is not a micromanager, and although in some cases He might have very specific directions for us, in many cases He is happy for us to exercise our freedom responsibly. Like a good father, He knows that part of helping us mature is giving us more and more space to act independently. In any strong relationship, a healthy silence can indicate trust and understanding. God's silence is always for a purpose. Sometimes silence serves to bring us back to His presence when we've wandered, sometimes to allow us to grow, sometimes for us to rest in our faith, and sometimes to better enjoy the sweet embrace of a longed-for reconnection.

Silence can develop our hunger for God's voice. When He breaks His silence, He sometimes tell us things that we don't want to hear. Things like "Wait" or "No" or "Don't you see you need forgiveness too?" When we listen for God's voice, we can't listen selectively. We have to open our lives as well as our ears and allow God to speak freely as God. Even if His words are hard to hear, they are always accompanied by a "Fear not! I am with you." God will never abandon us, and there's nothing that can separate us from His love (Romans 8:38-39). Even in the silence, God is with us.

Recognizing God's voice is critically important because He isn't the only one speaking. Satan has a voice, too, and he knows how to get into our heads. He will be the first to tell us, for instance, that

we are fakers, unworthy, unloved—and we may as well just give up. He has been around for ages, so he knows humans all too well. He knows our personalities and weaknesses. He knows just the right way to tempt us, cut us down, and keep us too busy, doubtful, or apathetic to pray or listen at all. He has a tone, too, that gets easier to recognize with time. He's mean, argumentative, and manipulative. He's always striking deals and explaining complicated justifications for things we know are wrong. He loves to stroke us and tell us how great we are as much as he loves to deride us and tell us how worthless we are. As long as our focus stays on ourselves, he's quite content with our pride.

I've started to recognize the lies that Satan likes to use on me. He never comes in a red cape, and he leaves his pitchfork at home. But he loves to ask me—and probably you—the same question that he asked Eve in the garden: “Did God *really* say . . . ?” (Genesis 3:1, emphasis added). He's constantly throwing doubt over the words God has spoken to us.

Satan stands over my shoulder, invisibly, as I look in the mirror. He loves to tell me I'm unworthy of love, and unfit to do what God has asked me to do. No matter how many times God whispers His love or reminds me of my purpose, I let doubt torture me. Of course, saying these things out loud makes them sound ridiculous, so I highly recommend speaking aloud the words of Satan's attacks. Say them to your praying friends, and say them to the Lord in prayer and ask Him if they are true.

We have to open our lives as well as our ears and allow God to speak freely as God. Even if His words are hard to hear, they are always accompanied by a “Fear not! I am with you.”

Your enemy's words will quickly lose their power. But realize that another and slightly tweaked attack will be coming soon. Be ready.

Also realize that the enemy's words aren't always cruel; sometimes they're delicious. He loves to tell me, for instance, how right I am when I'm angry at someone, and he's quick to assist me in recalling the grudges I have against someone else. Sometimes Satan's voice is actually much more enjoyable than God's voice telling me, "That's your pride throwing a fit. Don't be so easily offended" or "Don't be bitter." The more we practice listening to God's true voice, the more obvious and menacing Satan's voice becomes. The more words of God we know, the more truth we are able to defend ourselves with. One verse that comes to mind over and over again is John 10:10, which tells us that "the thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full." When I'm trying to determine if words are from the enemy or from God, I look at where those words lead me. Are they trying to *steal* my confidence or joy, *kill* my work, or *destroy* my marriage? Those are from the enemy. Are they leading me toward a more abundant life (even if there is hard truth that needs to be faced)? Those are from God.

Not every voice in our mind comes from God or the devil. We should be aware that our own thoughts and desires speak to us as well, and many of us carry echoes of words that other people have spoken over us. Some light, and some dark. Even our own thoughts and questions, desires, and emotions can be valuable for God to draw attention to. He will sometimes draw our attention to ourselves so that He can speak to our motives and passions. We will experience that kind of interaction more as we expect to hear Him in our everyday lives.

We won't ever get to the point where we are 100 percent sure of God's intentions 100 percent of the time. His divine wisdom and input will never be ours to control. But why are we listening anyway? We don't listen to God's voice so we can know the answers; we listen so we can know *Him*.

God's voice is recognizable by its quality, the Holy Spirit, and the content of what He says. His words lead us toward life. They lead us to Him. As we listen, self-reflection and prayer are vital elements of learning how to recognize His unique voice. We know that our enemy and our own thoughts are constantly vying for our attention. Take the time to look back at how God has led you to where you are. God is so often with us, guiding us and speaking to us without our noticing Him, that to learn His voice we need to recognize what He has already told us. God's words are often confirmed in multiple ways.

We don't listen to God's voice so we can know the answers; we listen so we can know *Him*.

When we are unsure of what He has said or whether what we heard was His voice, we can always ask Him directly. He will often get our attention another way or confirm His voice in Scripture, by circumstances, through other people, or in any of the ways we can expect to hear Him speak.

You are not on a difficult quest to hear God at the top of a foreboding mountain. God is the One pursuing you. Not only can you hear Him, but when you do, you will also understand Him. He's not being coy or speaking in riddles. His voice is speaking for your good, for your formation, and to build an authentic relationship with you. He has good words to bring you peace, wisdom, freedom, and purpose. He is writing a big beautiful story,

and He has something to tell you about the part He has designed for you to play. You'll never believe the role He's designed for you. It's greater than you would ever imagine for yourself. Listen closely. God knows who He made you to be. When you learn to recognize His voice, He'll tell you things about who you are and who He is that will completely change how you experience life in this broken, beautiful world.

WHAT GOD HAS SAID, AND WHAT HE IS SAYING

Consider taking time to process your own journey in a journal. Share with a friend who is a good listener—and listen to their story too.

1. Read John 10:24–30. When have you heard God speak to you? Why were you able to recognize His voice?
2. When, if ever, have you seen God’s voice confirmed by His glory, through the Holy Spirit, or in Scripture?
3. Make a list of fifteen things you know are true about you, God, or the world based on God’s voice in the Bible and your experience. Look through the list and remember the way God told you those truths. Do you see any patterns?
4. Why is hearing God’s voice important to you? What do you do to listen?

RESPONDING TO GOD'S INVITATIONS

I spent forty days of Lent disappointing God.

It started with a crash and shards of glass flying into every corner of the bathroom. A tentative voice from downstairs called up, “Everyone okay?” My favorite perfume—the one I had used through store samples of for years before I could buy an entire bottle—had slipped from my hands and hit the floor to cause a surprisingly dramatic explosion. A small crater in the tile still memorializes that morning, when the entire bathroom was overwhelmed in an instant with the fragrance of real perfume.

I held my breath and felt the tightening of my gut and diaphragm. All of the perfume was gone. The smell was so strong, I wasn't sure I even liked “tuberose and gardenia with notes of sandalwood” anymore. I grabbed paper towels and a garbage bag, trying to soak up as much of the perfume as I could before I dragged the broom across the floor. Careful to notice the smallest glimmers of glass shards, I patted and rubbed circles around the puddles on the path where bare feet walk. My hands soaked in

the oils through the towels, and part of me didn't want to ever wash them again. The bottle had fallen right in front of my toes, and my feet were saturated. I washed them off in the tub. As I ran my fingers through my toes, I couldn't help but think of Mary Magdalene and the time that she broke her costly perfume bottle wide open over the feet of Jesus. I wondered if His anointed feet smelled as strong as mine, or if her hands had also taken on the scent. Days after, when a gentle breeze would remind me of how well skin absorbs perfume, I would think of Mary and Jesus.

That's when a beautiful thought turned into a bad idea.

It was almost Lent, so I decided to be like Mary and pour out my greatest sacrifices for Jesus. All of them. Not something easy like giving up chocolate, but true spiritual disciplines. A strict diet seemed to make sense. (I wouldn't mind losing a few pounds anyway.) I would also read through a devotional every day of Lent. Well, actually two devotionals. Also, I was curious about the Passover, so I announced I would be hosting my own Seder for our small group. A discipline of fasting from unhealthy foods, a discipline of reading, and a discipline of learning—I was genuinely excited to see what amazing results all of this discipline would bring to my life by Easter Sunday. It was the spiritual version of picking out my summer swimsuit on the first day of my diet.

I approached Lent committed to enriching my spiritual life through discipline, to paying attention to God through sacrifice, and to paying attention to Him by adding six books to my nightstand. But this is not actually paying attention, not true listening or *shema*. It may sound similar, but it couldn't be more different. What I thought was a discipline of listening to God was actually my own spiritual discipline of self-help.

The word for *listen* in Hebrew is *shema*. It's most famously found in Deuteronomy 6, as the first word of the *Shema* prayer: "Hear, O Israel: the LORD our God, the LORD is one" (v. 4). In *Strong's Hebrew Dictionary*, *shema* (H8085) has a fascinatingly broad definition. The primary definition is threefold: to hear, to listen, to obey. *Shema* also means to listen as an act of yielding to another. When we listen to God, we have to yield to Him by not always being the one to talk. We may need to set down our journal and pen, pause our prayer, and yield to a space of silence so that we can listen. Hear. Respond.

During one of my Lenten devotions, after I was already eight days behind in my second devotional book and had eaten Gummi Bears for dinner the night before, I encountered Jesus dining with His disciples as I read John 13. I sat with the story of the Last Supper, picturing the scene the way the many paintings and tapestries I've seen depict it. I saw Peter making his big promises to Jesus . . . and Christ without a hint of judgment telling him that he would never be able to do all of that. And my diet, devotions, Passover, and disappointments flashed before me like Peter's own zealous promises. I was overcome by Christ's love, by knowing that my expectations of myself had been marvelously different from God's expectations of me. His hopes were so wildly different for me that even though I had utterly failed at my resolutions, I had failed at things that didn't matter to God much after all.

The promises I made for Lent were made to Christ, but they weren't made *for* Him. I didn't ask Him what would bring Him joy or how He would like me to celebrate His resurrection.

The promises I made for Lent were made *to* Christ, but they weren't made *for* Him.

I didn't ask Him what would bring Him joy or how He would like me to celebrate His resurrection. My promise of worship had been a pledge to prove myself: if He could suffer, I could suffer. Still, I could see in the eyes of Christ, on the verge of His death, not a shred of disappointment in me because of my broken promises or my brokenness that gave birth to those promises. I saw only love. Only forgiveness.

In a hungry effort to seize that forgiveness, I prayed. I had already changed the rules of my diet in the first week and skipped some of the devotions that didn't look interesting. Not only had I failed to keep my many Lenten promises, but I had made the wrong promises from the very beginning. It was all a pious hijacking of Christ's resurrection to be about me instead of Him. My salvation, my faith, my promises, my worship—oh, dear Jesus! Would it be possible for me to look at You for one moment with the same selfless love that You have for Peter, with the same love that You have in Your eyes when You look at me?

I returned to the Last Supper and read the passage again. This time I sat inside the passage, instead of in front of it. I could see Peter making his bold promise as though he were making it to me, and I could feel Christ's sigh of knowing. His perfectly balanced love for every part of who Peter was with His vision of who Peter would become. I realized that I was very close to Christ in my imagination of the story: instead of the apostle John, it was me who was leaning against the rough linen on Jesus's chest.

John reclined against Jesus at this same dinner where Peter declared his devotion. That was where I was invited to be. Not at the end of the table, promising to follow Jesus to my death (or through a no-carb diet), but right up against His chest. Feeling the

rhythmic inhale and exhale of His breathing. Resting comfortably, leaning in closely. No self-aggrandizing promises. Simple glances, gratitude, and shared experiences. The most basic acts of love are the raw material of worship.

I dared not move . . . or blink . . . or think. I burrowed my cheek into the soft suede of the couch that I have sat on a million times before, the cushions that my kids spilled yogurt on and slept on when they were sick. I knew it was just a couch, but against my cheek it reminded me of leaning on Jesus. It was like a thin veil that connected me to the presence of heaven on the other side. The reclining ease of Jesus was strangely embraceable as I sank into the cushions.

For the rest of Lent, as my original resolutions continued to crumble, I simply rested my hand on my cheek—like a separated lover clutches a locket—and imagined a linen tunic. *I was loved. I was forgiven. I felt close to Jesus.* On Wednesday of Holy Week, I remembered that Mary had poured her perfume on Jesus. Not to impress Him or prove her loyalty and sacrifice, but because she loved Him. I could feel Jesus silencing anyone who would dare interrupt the sweetness that He shared with her in that moment. I could feel the heaviness of His impending goodbye and the fierceness of His love.

And this is the Christ who smiles at each of us from the open tomb where the stone has been rolled away: “I did what you couldn’t because I love you.”

Easter—in fact, the gospel itself—is entirely about what God has done for me, not the other way around. Lent was the perfect reminder that I cannot save myself, not from the allure of Gummi Bears, let alone my sins. When it comes to obeying God, I too often

hijack the opportunity to do good things for Him as a form of self-improvement or to try to impress other people. In *The Great Omission*, Dallas Willard reminds us that “grace is not opposed to effort; it’s opposed to earning.” In our efforts to live the grace-filled lives God calls us to, aware of His presence and His voice, we shouldn’t be surprised if our first attempt leads us to deep failure. It’s only when we completely fail to earn grace that we are fully free to receive it.

Despite all of our efforts to hear God’s voice, we never earn the right to His presence through our discipline. We already have the grace of His invitation.

I like to think of my need for intentional time with God as a spiritual invitation to deepen my relationship with Him rather than a spiritual discipline for me to keep up. Reading, praying, serving, and other disciplines become opportunities for me to encounter God and for Him to shape my character rather than a chance to prove my spirituality or to ensure I avoid consequences for not spending time with Him.

When I offered God my own holiness, my piety was far from an obedient response. Real obedience is the result of listening and responding to what God is actually asking us to do. Real listening—*shema*—is listening first, hearing with understanding, and then responding to what God has said. *Shema* listening includes the element of our response; it is impossible to listen to God’s words and not be moved by them.

We respond to God’s voice by what we do as well as who we are. Our response could look like love, obedience, or worship.

First, sometimes our response to God’s voice is simply *love*.

From the beginning God has given us freedom of will and

freedom of choice. Why? So we could be free to love Him, not forced to obey Him. God is gently winning us over, like someone stooping low, softly speaking to a bird, “Here sweet bird, let me hear that gorgeous song of yours” (see Song of Songs 2:14). He could have created us as obedient robots, but instead He gently loves us and proves He will not abuse His power by offering the choice whether or not we want to be with Him. He is speaking tender words of kindness, hoping we might choose to be loved.

Since my earliest memory I’ve been doing an exhausting audition to earn any approval I could get. You’d think from all the tap dancing and jazz hands that “I love you” would be the words I most longed to hear with every fiber of my being, but they aren’t. I’m strangely skeptical of anyone who loves me. I just know they’ll change their mind the minute I mess up, and that ice is too thin to stand on. I would rather God—or anyone for that matter—be impressed with me than love me. My obedience to God’s words has the illusion of being something I can control. His love, on the other hand, feels like a dangerous thing to need.

That’s why my heart skipped a beat as my friend began her story: “I was a perfect child because I had to be . . .” I was transported back to my own childhood and the weight of perfection I carried on my shoulders. Growing up in a home with so many rules about what I could wear, whom I could be friends with, what I could read, and how my chores had to be done, I was constantly earning my place in our family and fearing the consequences of failure.

She continued: “My dad was an alcoholic. . . .”

My other “perfect” friends with “perfect” lives had moms with incredibly high standards of cleanliness and body measurements. They had rebellious siblings whom they had to balance out. They

had parents who were grieving or busy working, and they lightened Mom's and Dad's burdens by proving how self-sufficient they were. They had parents who seemed to constantly be on the brink of separation, and they hoped that being the perfect child would give them a reason to stay together.

Many of us have learned to adapt to broken situations by trying to be perfect instead of simply being loved. In light of our broken experiences with love in the past, we can easily underestimate the importance of being loved by God. We can't be unique and special and interesting enough to get His love. We can't be steady and loyal and smart enough to get His love. We can't be impressive and spiritual and obedient enough to get His love. We don't have to be the perfect child, because we have the perfect—and perfectly loving—Father. As you listen for God's voice, let your first response be to receive His fiercely unconditional love.

Next, our response to God's voice may simply be *obedience*.

Jesus said, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments" (John 14:15 ESV). Do you see how love comes first? Obedience isn't our gateway to love; it's our response to God's love. Sometimes what God invites us to do isn't what we expect, but it's always what we need. After all, spiritual invitations can take all forms. They don't always have to look like journaling or Bible reading or prayer. Although the basic habits of prayer and reading Scripture keep us anchored in God's truth and presence with us, sometimes God has additional ways of inviting us to pay attention to His voice—like the time He showed Lisa the sky.

My friend Lisa sat on a bench staring at an ivy-covered wall. She had been given a simple assignment: choose a spiritual discipline to practice daily for the next sixty days.

As she stared at the ivy, the bright green tendrils seemed to be coming closer, the walls closing in. With aging parents, frustrating family dynamics, tensions at work, and distance from her adult children all clamoring for her thoughts and attention, the distractions were inescapable. The tightening of her chest could have been the walls closing to crush her. Then she heard God's voice say, "Look up."

Lisa was exhausted and emotionally raw as she slid forward on the bench and let her head fall back against it. The sky. The big, blue, open, boundless sky. The expanse seemed to hold a message from God: "You are not trapped. You are not confined. I have you. You are contained."

As Lisa let her eyes drop to the wall, the ivy looked beautiful for the first time, and she noticed a small hole in the wall where she could see beyond it. Yes. There was life beyond the circumstances of her life right now. Everything she felt was a limitation was actually holding her in the place God had for her. The sky had called her to that conversation with God.

"Can I look at the sky each day?" she asked her instructor. "Is that enough of a discipline?"

Lisa told him the story. He reminded her, "It's not about us being disciplined; it's about responding to the invitations God has for us."

There is no hierarchy of holiness in our practices, so long as we respond to what God impresses on our hearts with obedience

We don't have to be the perfect child, because we have the perfect—and perfectly loving—Father. As you listen for God's voice, let your first response be to receive His fiercely unconditional love.

instead of choosing our own way that we think looks more impressive.

Finally, sometimes when God speaks, there is no better response than *worship*.

Mary, Jesus's mother, responded to the angel's message about bearing God's Son with the Magnificat (Luke 1:46–55); Miriam responded to God's victory over the Egyptians with the Song of the Sea (Exodus 15:1–18); and David responded to God's work in his life and in the nation of Israel with psalms of praise and his own music and dancing. At times God is so good, we can't help the joy that comes flooding out in response to Him.

My husband and I took the kids to a giant warehouse full of jump houses, and by some fluke we had the place all to ourselves. We ended up on a giant inflatable maze playing dodgeball with foam balls. We chased each other through the obstacles, ambushed one another, and got in giant tickle fights. I was hiding behind a pillar waiting to throw a ball at whoever walked by next when I peeked out and spied Mike with our kids. He was being so goofy. The kids were squealing, and all three of them ended up in a pile on the floor in breathless laughter. He is such a good dad. I love that he is the dad in our family.

“God,” I prayed almost without thinking, “You're a good Dad. Are You ever fun?”

I tried to remember the last time I had fun with God. The last time I played with Him. The last time we laughed. And I couldn't remember anything. Maybe that was a dumb idea. God is a good Dad in lots of other ways.

Later that day, Mike took the kids on a walk so I could have the house to myself. My prayer from earlier that day came back

to me. “God, were You ever fun in the Bible? Do You play? If You’d ever want to, I’d love the chance to have fun with You.”

I turned my attention to my computer and put on my classical music station as I prepared to settle in to some work. My radio app said it was playing my classical music, but instead it was playing the playlist I’d made for my kids’ dance party. That wasn’t right. I tried to start it up again, and it again played the same dance song. This had never happened before, and it hasn’t happened since, although it could have just been a coincidence (we’ll talk more about that later). But since I had just prayed and asked God if He was ever fun, I took the lyrics of this happy song as His response. Yeah, He was fun! He created fun! In the only appropriate response I could imagine, I turned up the volume to dance. I didn’t only dance (badly) to a cheesy song; I laughed. Hard. Now, every time I notice God’s playful spirit in nature or His sense of humor in my story, I worship Him for being a good, fun Father.

As you listen, as you notice and recognize God’s voice, you will have your own way to engage with His words. I can’t tell you what God has to say to you, although I know it will be good. The real adventure is hearing His voice for yourself. God is not a “how-to handbook” sort of author. The definition of *shema* is the closest we get to any sort of guideline when it comes to hearing God’s voice: pay attention and listen, recognize God’s voice with understanding, and respond to the words He has for you. As you listen, you’ll have your very own stories of your very own encounters with God, the way you experience His presence, and your natural response to His words—I can’t wait to hear them.

God has already spoken: “I am with you” (Matthew 28:20). How will you respond?

RESPONDING TO GOD'S VOICE

Consider taking time to process your own journey in a journal. Share with a friend who is a good listener—and listen to their story too.

1. Read James 1:22–25. When, if ever, have you heard God's voice and ignored it?
2. When, if ever, have you made big promises to God—and were they for God or for you to prove yourself? What happened when you tried to keep those promises?
3. When, if ever, have you been intentional about a spiritual practice? What discipline did you choose? What was that experience like for you?
4. Is God speaking to you now? What might it look like to respond to something He is saying to you?