

EDITORIAL

Before the Iron Curtain fell, Dr. Bob Provost (now President of Slavic Gospel Association) traveled to meet with the Baptist Union president in Prague. Arriving at the headquarters, Bob discovered the president had journeyed to a city three hours away. Dr. Provost continued on by bus, but still could not find the official nor speak the language. So he fervently prayed, “Lord, please direct me to this man.”

Early Sunday evening had arrived by now. What should he do? Then Bob saw some older women walking by and he simply said, “Baptist.” Their eyes lit up and they beckoned him to follow them to a Baptist church, where the people asked if he came from Grace Community Church in America (and he did). Later, he inquired how they could possibly have known about his home church; they said Grace was the only church in America that they knew by name.

Bob preached that night, having been invited to do so since he was from a well-known church in the States. After delivering the message, he retired to the front pew. A man then walked in a side door, sat down next to Bob, and introduced himself as the president of the Baptist Union. Bob received God’s answer.

Christians long to hear from God, as did Dr. Provost. We can identify with the psalmist’s prayer, “Answer me when I call to you, O my righteous God. . . . be merciful to me and hear my prayer” (Ps 4:1; also 13:3, 20:9, 141:1). God promises to hear the saints’ prayers (Pss 50:15, 91:15; Jer 33:3; Zech 13:9; Matt 7:7; John 15:7). Both the prophets and apostles testified to God’s faithful answers (Pss 66:19–20; 86:6–7; 138:3; 145:18–19; 1 John 3:22; 5:14–15).

How does God speak to us today? How will we hear from Him? He communicates in three basic ways: (1) the created world (Ps 19:1–2); (2) Christ and the Scriptures (Heb 1:1–2); and (3) life circumstances (compare Matt 26:39 with 26:47–27:56). God wants to be heard far more often than we actually hear; but all too often we are not listening for Him. We need to be more alert like Samuel, who said, “Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening” (1 Sam 3:9).

Hearing When We Have Not Prayed

Hearing from God does not always follow a cause and effect sequence, humanly speaking. Sometimes God intervenes when we have not petitioned Him. The most incredible times of hearing often involve gracious and merciful Divine responses, unprompted by our prayers.

On April 6, 1970, around 8:00 p.m. at Scott Memorial Baptist Church in San Diego, I heard from God about an issue over which I had never prayed—my personal salvation. Others had been praying, like our next-door neighbors and several family members, but I was the one who heard the answer. Their prayers were according to God's will concerning my salvation (1 Tim 2:4).

Four months later, July 1970, I again heard from God concerning an issue that had never crossed my mind—resigning my officer's commission in the United States Navy and going to seminary and entering the ministry. No one, to my knowledge, prayed for me concerning this, but the Lord definitely directed me into His will.

At the time, I became firmly convinced that this new direction originated neither from my own desire nor at the instigation of Satan, so I began to make plans immediately. However, the people closest to me urged a slower approach. To them this "call to ministry" seemed somewhat mysterious. It was not like "God told me" with an audible voice, but the sense of Divine direction would not go away. My wife and I presented ourselves before God to do His will and prayed that He would make it so clear that, as new believers, we would not miss it. Forty years have passed. Looking back now through almost four decades of ministry, it seems much more certain to everyone that the impressions I had in 1970 were of God and He actually did call me to the ministry.

God knows our needs (Matt 6:32) and does not necessarily require someone's prayer to prompt His action. For example, have you ever been convicted of sin when you were certain no one else knew about your iniquity? God knew (Ps 139:1–6) and, most likely, impressed your conscience by bringing to mind a portion of His Word with which you were already familiar and which identified your transgression as sin, similar to David's experience (Ps 32:3–4).

Hearing Before We Have Prayed

We often quickly pray, not realizing that God may have already spoken; all we need to do is prayerfully find His previously delivered answer in Scripture.

Take God's will, for instance. Much of what we seek has already been given to us. Significant Scripture passages explicitly state "this is the will of God," such as "to offer your bodies as living sacrifices" (Rom 12:1–2), "avoid[ing] sexual immorality" (1 Thess 4:3), or "give[ing] thanks in all circumstances" (1 Thess 5:18). For additional specific statements about God's will, see Ps 103:21; Eph 5:17–21; 1 Tim 2:4; 1 Pet 2:13–15; 3:7; 5:2; and 1 John 5:14–15. God's Word often contains His answer to the prayer, "Lord, show me Your will for my life."

One of the most amazing Bible texts on prayer is, "For your Father knows what you need before you ask him" (Matt 6:8). Its import deeply etched itself in our family's memory during the first semester of seminary (Fall 1971). My wife saw a man crawling across an empty lot; he had tumbled out of a tree

while trimming it and broken his leg. She helped him into our car and rushed him to the hospital. We thought nothing more of the event.

Two weeks later, my spouse shared by phone our testimony and the gospel with an unsaved acquaintance whom we had known in the Navy. The friend received Christ. My wife then wanted to send this new believer a ten-dollar Bible, but our meager seminary budget just couldn't afford such a luxury. So, our family began to pray for the extra cash. Within days a thank you note arrived from the man with the broken leg. He wrote to express his gratefulness for helping him and included a check. If you guessed \$10 for the check amount, you are right; that is how God anticipated our prayer and provided for it, even before we knew the need.

Hearing Because We Have Prayed

God normally answers prayer with one of four responses: (1) directly as asked (Acts 12:5–17); (2) delayed, but as requested (Luke 1:13); (3) differently than we prayed (Rom 8:26–27); or (4) denied altogether (2 Cor 12:8–10).

James writes that we ought to condition our entire life, including prayer, with “If it is the Lord’s will, we will live and do this or that” (Jas 4:15). John assures us that God hears and answers prayer according to His will (1 John 5:14–15). Jesus exemplified this kind of prayer life. “My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will” (Matt 26:39). Certainly, God’s will frames all of His answers.

Several years ago, Patricia MacArthur (wife of John MacArthur) had a nearly fatal automobile accident that should have resulted in paralysis. A little over a year later, she had completely recovered. I later interviewed her for my book, *The Healing Promise* (Christian Focus), and asked “How were you praying and how did God answer your prayers?” She responded, “When my extremities went numb, I asked the Lord to restore me. . . . Because of the effect it would have on His ministry, He saw fit to answer the prayers according to the way they were asked—not because I was deserving of this particular kind of healing.” She received because she asked and her prayer conformed to God’s will (Matt 7:7–8).

Hearing but Rejecting God’s Answer

The nation Israel often sought direction from God; however, Israel frequently rejected the Divine answer (Ps 81:11; 106:24–25). After Jerusalem fell in 586 B.C., the remnant inquired about God’s will through the prayers of Jeremiah (Jer 42:2–6), but the very people who commissioned Jeremiah later rejected the Lord’s answer (Jer 43:2–4). Similarly, the Jews of Jesus’ day had been praying for the arrival of Messiah, but did not receive Him when He arrived (John 1:11; 5:39–40). This pattern of disobedience does not fit God’s desire (Ps 81:13), nor does it match the characteristic pattern of submission in

true believers (John 10:27). However, Jesus continues to beckon obedience (Rev 3:20).

Years ago my wife disciplined a girl who attended a Christian college. Tragically, this young woman became pregnant outside of marriage and then sought our counsel. I told her the first step to recovery involved confessing her immorality as sin against God (Gen 39:9; Ps 51:4). Her response startled me. She blurted out that nowhere in Scripture did God expressly forbid intimate relationships between two people who intended to marry. I took her to a passage she apparently had overlooked or forgotten (1 Thess 4:3). Then she blustered, "I don't care what the Bible says, we are in love." She clearly heard God's will, yet defiantly rejected it.

Hearing God's Silence

Not hearing from God sometimes provides louder messages than actually having your prayers answered. Scripture details many negative reasons why God acts as if He hasn't heard. "When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives . . ." (Jas 4:3). "If I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened . . ." (Ps 66:18; cf. Isa 59:2). ". . . be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect . . . so that nothing will hinder your prayers" (1 Pet 3:7). "You do not have, because you do not ask God" (Jas 4:2). To these reasons, you can add: (1) faithless prayer (Jas 1:5-7); (2) praying outside of God's will (1 John 5:14-15); (3) ignorant prayer (Rom 8:26); (4) a lack of persistent prayer (Luke 18:1-8); and (5) arrogant prayer (Matt 6:5, 7).

On the positive side, the lack of an immediate answer could mean that God wants to test your faith (Jas 1:3; 1 Pet 4:12). Additionally, the response could be delayed because God has planned a better time. The Master's Seminary recently completed a major building project that would normally last two years, but it continued eight years. The unexpected and, at times, unappreciated additional time enabled us to (1) make design changes which significantly enhanced the building's utility, (2) take advantage of rapidly changing technology, and (3) complete the fund raising so that an expensive bank loan proved unnecessary. We can now look back through those agonizing years and see God's wisdom which extended the timing of His final answer for our new Library and Faculty Office complex.

Hearing Someone Other Than God

A small segment of Christendom asserts that God normally and frequently communicates to His people through visions, dreams, angelic messengers, theophanies, and the voice of God. Beware of this patently false boast, however real it may appear at first. Take dreams for example. In the entire Old Testament (which spans at least 4,000 years), fewer than 20 specific dreams to fewer than 15 people are recorded. Only six appear in the New

Testament, all in Matthew. Regarding visions, less than 25 particular visions were given to not more than 15 people in the Old Testament. Even fewer examples are found in the New Testament. Biblical dreams and visions were extremely rare and never in Scripture given for mundane purposes or to the masses for communicating God’s will.

Make certain you have heard from God and not some human or demonic source. Don’t listen to a voice within you (probably your own inner voice) or look for signs that make sense only to you. Most important, don’t be influenced by people who claim to have a word from God. This mistake cost King Ahab (1 Kings 22:1–40) and the prophet Hananiah (Jer 28:1–17) their lives. Don’t be deceived by the counterfeit claim, “God told me!”

When God truly answers your prayer, several features will authenticate it as from Him. First, it will not contradict Scripture. Second, it won’t direct you to act sinfully. Third, it will not take you outside of God’s will. Fourth, it will not come by supernatural means such as that experienced by Old Testament prophets and New Testament apostles.

Hearing for Effect

George Mueller (1805–98), one of the church’s most effective prayer practitioners, recorded this entry in his prayer diary:

This day has been one of the most remarkable days concerning the funds. There was no money on hand, and I was waiting on God. I asked Him repeatedly, but no supplies came. The headmaster called to tell me that one pound two shillings was needed to buy bread for the three houses and to meet the other expenses. . . . At four o’clock I wondered how the sisters had gotten through the day. I went to the Girls’ Orphan House to meet for prayer and found that a box had come for me from Barnstable. The delivery fee was paid, otherwise there would have been no money to pay for it. See how the Lord’s hand is in the smallest matters! The box was opened, and it contained more than fourteen pounds for the orphans and the Bible Fund.

I commend the following basic prayer pattern to help you also hear from God (Ps 138:3).

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| 1. | <i>Admission</i> | – | Lord, I am unworthy and unable! |
| 2. | <i>Submission</i> | – | Lord, you know best! |
| 3. | <i>Transmission</i> | – | Lord, please intervene! |
| 4. | <i>Intermission</i> | – | Lord, I wait on you! |
| 5. | <i>Permission</i> | – | Lord, thank you for your response! |

Hearing Aids to Prayer

When you hear from God too infrequently, or you want to listen attentively so that you miss as little as humanly possible, regularly employ these “hearing aids.”

1. Review biblical reasons that contribute to not hearing from God; ask yourself if any one or a combination of these features is true of you.
2. Reflect on God’s creation; ask yourself what God is communicating through it (Ps 19:1–6).
3. Spend time in God’s Word; let Him communicate what He has already written (Job 23:12).
4. Talk to God less; quietly reflect more on His glorious majesty (Ps 46:10).
5. Rehearse significant answers to prayer from your past; praise God for them (1 Thess 1:2–3).
6. Be faithful with small, seemingly insignificant prayer answers (Luke 16:10).
7. Delight yourself in the Lord (Ps 37:4).
8. Maintain a constant attitude of prayer (1 Thess 5:17).
9. Thankfully count all things, e.g. food, clothing, and shelter as gifts from God, even though you have not prayed specifically (1 Thess 5:18).
10. Use your prayer life to personally worship God (Ps 119).
11. Pray for God’s glory, pleasure, and will to result from His answers to your prayers (1 Cor 10:31).
12. Keep a prayer diary; record God’s responses.

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