

God Speaks: Listening to God through Scripture

By Steven Carrizal

I have a friend who reads the Bible a lot. In fact, he told me once that he reads the Bible too much. Not fully understanding how one could read the Bible too much, I asked him to explain. So he clarified that maybe “too much” is not the best way to say it. Rather, he means that in his reading he can over-focus on Hebrew words or other research—as if the Bible were a history puzzle. He calls these pursuits, “rabbit trails that really don’t impact life”—trails that cause him to “miss the message God has put simply right in front of me.”

My friend has a point. There are many interesting things in the Bible to distract an inquiring mind: words, customs, events, doctrine, and theology. Diving into these topics may satisfy our curiosity and bring clarity to our thinking. However, as with my friend, sometimes we can spend “so much time and energy on all the ways the word ‘neighbor’ was used two thousand years ago that I don’t have the time or energy to actually get off my butt and help my neighbor who is in need.” My friend has a point here, too. After all, it is the wise response after hearing the words of scripture (see Matthew 7:24-27). So it might seem that the faithful pattern is to read then do—hear the word, obey the word. But before we rush to this conclusion, let’s not assume we know what God’s desired action is for us and find ourselves identifying with the Pharisees. For all their efforts in searching the Scriptures and doing everything they found, they still failed to “come to Jesus” (John 5:39).

So maybe we encourage a moment of pause. Somewhere in between reading and doing, between inaction and reaction, we stop and listen. We want to make space for God to speak to us, and in that speaking, guide us—not only toward action, but even more toward awareness of the work of the Spirit in us and through us. What this requires from us is a different posture than we may be used to. Instead of quickly referencing connected passages or digging through reference guides (commentaries, lexicons, and dictionaries), we need to give scripture space. We change our role from explorer or researcher to listener. We slow down, sit back, soak in the words, and become open to the nudge of the Spirit.

Here are four ways of listening to God through Scripture.

Lectio Divina

Contemplative in nature, this ancient way of attending to Scripture brings together reading and meditation. In a culture of information, consumption, speed, and efficiency, *lectio divina* can be a welcomed respite, a rest stop in midst of a busy day. *Lectio divina* won’t get us through the Bible in a year and it won’t satisfy the need to pursue knowledge. Rather, this practice asks us to patiently wait and listen.

In his book *Finding Sanctuary*, Abbot Christopher Jamison says *lectio divina* helps us in three ways. First, we see the words before us “as a gift to be received, not a problem to be dissected.”¹ Rather than bringing our questions to the passage, we let the words question us. Second, *lectio* is slow and repetitive. This is not a quick read. Each pass through the text is deliberate and thoughtful. Third, the

¹ Jamison, Christopher, *Finding Sanctuary: Monastic Steps for Everyday Life* (Liturgical Press, Collegville, Minnesota, 2006), p. 64.

whole process flows out of prayer and leads us through prayer. The words on the page move into our hearts and shape the words of our prayer.

One of the beauties of *lectio divina* is its flexibility and portability. It can be practiced alone or with others and the length of time needed for it depends on the length of the text and time given for silence and journaling/sharing. Here's a basic format:

Start with a time of silence.

First Pass: Read the passage slowly listening for a word, phrase, or image from the text that stands out. Sit in silent reflection on that word, phrase, or image. Listen for and receive anything you may hear God saying to you through this text. Write down or share this word, phrase, or image.

Second Pass: Read the passage again. This time imagine yourself in the setting. What do you see, sense, or experience? Sit in silent reflection with this new layer of imagination. Listen for and receive anything you may hear God saying to you through this text. Write down or share how the text opens up in your imagination.

Third Pass: Read the passage a third time. This time notice any comfort or discomfort you may be feeling. Sit in silent reflection on how God is working in you through this text. What is God calling you to do or not do, to pick up or lay down? Write down or share how you feel called to respond.

Finish with a time of silence.

Dwelling in the Word²

Dwelling in the Word is a modern adaptation of *lectio divina* that invites people to listen to scripture, to God, and to one another. While it shares some characteristics like slow repetitive reading and reflection, it differs in two particular ways. One difference is that it is intended to be communal exercise in which people listen attentively to one another. Another difference is that the group doing the "dwelling" returns to the same passage for a long period of time, even a year or two. Developed as a method for congregations to discern how God is calling them into missional action, Dwelling in the Word has become an exercise for any kind of group (large or small) desiring to use scripture as a way to discern what God is doing in and through them.

A session of Dwelling in the Word for a small group looks something like this:

Start with a time of silence.

Read the selected passage. Participants listen for a verse, phrase, or word that stands out. Everyone sits in time of silent reflection.

Following this reflective move, the group moves to sharing and listening. Each person has the opportunity to briefly share what stood out from this reading of the passage and something which they would like to learn more about. While one person is sharing, all others are listening deeply to the one sharing. In the practice of Dwelling in the Word, this is called "listening the other into free speech" as the rest of the group creates a safe place for the sharing.

² Dwelling in the Word is a practice developed by Church Innovation for the purpose of missional discernment.

In the last move of this exercise, each member of the group retells what another group member said. This is done around the circle until everyone has shared and everyone has been repeated.

Dwelling in the Word is a practice that opens us up not only to what God may be saying to us, but more importantly, how God is moving in the mind and heart of another person. This requires a different kind of attentiveness than just processing our own reflections.

Three Column Bible Study (Adapted for a Listening Exercise)

The three column method is an inductive approach to Bible study. However, with some adaptations, it can be very useful as a listening exercise individually and with small groups. As with *lectio divina* and Dwelling in the Word, start with a passage that is no more than eight to ten verses. Next, take a regular sheet of paper, turn it to the landscape orientation, and divide it into three columns. In the first column, write the passage word for word. Doing so requires deliberate attention to each word forcing you to go slow. Follow this step with a period of silence. Let the words that you just wrote settle into your heart. Listen for the message of the passage to come through. Then, in the second column, rewrite the passage in your own words. Do your best Eugene Peterson imitation, summarize the passage, or write as if for young children to understand. Follow this step with another period of silence. Where do you feel the nudge of the Spirit? What do you hear God saying to you? If you are with a group, take a moment to share summaries before entering into the silence. In the third column, write down “This is what I hear” statements. This is a great place to answer the question “What am I hearing from God and how do I respond?” Again, if you are with a group, take a moment to share responses.

On Location

One of the most creative ways to listen to God through scripture is to read the Bible on location and with unlikely reading partners. In other words, get out of the comfortable setting of the study, the living room, or the classroom. In his book *Reading the Bible with the Damned*, Bob Ekblad says that a change in scenery can help us with a change in perspective. He calls for taking the Bible to the streets, to the prisons, to the slums. Read the Gospels with today’s tax collectors and sinners. Read the Exodus story with today’s slaves. Find the addicted, the undocumented, the disabled, and the ex-con. Use any of the three listening practices above and consider these questions: How does a new context change what you hear in the passage? What do these new reading partners hear in the passage that you haven’t? Take notes and listen for what God is saying to you through scripture as experienced in the lives of those marginalized in our world.

Conclusion

If you are like me and from a church tradition that highly values the Bible, then Bible study has been a priority. It’s what we do in our class times, in our small group times, and in our quiet times. We have been trained to have an unquenchable thirst for knowledge gained from the Bible. The exercises above offer a different approach, unfamiliar and uncomfortable. They are about giving scripture space to read us, for the Spirit to speak to us, for God to call forth from us the Jesus life. Rest in the word, and listen.