

Prayer Is: Listening  
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This is Week 2 of a three-part series titled ***Prayer Is...*** Last week Barry intro'ed the series with a focus on **Asking**, and challenged us to **Pray Daily**, to **Ask For Big & Bold Things**, and finally to **Trust In God's Answers**. If you missed that message, you'll be able to find it on our FB page or on YouTube channel WellSpring Christian, and I'd encourage you to do that.

Asking is a great place to start looking at Prayer, for sure. You might be at a place where you're not even sure what you're allowed to ask God *FOR*. I mean, you can drive through Taco Bell all day long placing your order, but if you're asking for a Whopper, you're going to be disappointed. Not saying you're gonna be thrilled with the Quesarito, but it sure helps to stay within the realm of possibility!

But let me lay this on you: as good a start as **Asking** is, if that is all the further you get in your relationship with God, He might not actually be your *God*. He might just be your Drive-Thru. And I can understand that, especially when you feel like you need something from Him, some Divine Intervention to make everything right.

I'd be remiss if I did not mention one of the most recognized calls to prayer that has happened in our country since 9/11: the plight of **Damar Hamlin**, the player for the Bills who collapsed in cardiac arrest last Monday night. There are likely few if any here today who aren't at least a bit aware of that situation. The game stopped as nearly 24 million viewers watched medics rush to the field to provide emergency medical treatment to Hamlin, who remains in critical condition.

And the Christian community was delighted and encouraged to see both teams on their knees praying for Damar. But the real excitement came Tuesday at the end of ESPN's **NFL Live** show, as sports analyst and retired quarterback **Dan Orlovsky** prayed for Hamlin live on-air. This in a world where people seem more proficient at "sending thoughts" than saying prayers, Orlovsky bowed his head and took it straight to God. And he did so in a way which left little room to think that he hasn't made countless similar trips in the past. It was very cool!

Yet it all leaves me feeling a bit ambivalent. Yes, it's wonderful to see so many people focus on prayer in the midst of a frightening and tragic situation, but I also have to recognize that far too many people in the world view prayer ONLY as **asking**, ONLY as **a last resort**. I wonder how many of the 24 million wouldn't understand the need for a Part Two or Part Three in a series on Prayer, once you'd covered Asking. But I don't believe that's where God does His best work, which means that's not where you and I need Him most! If our relationship with God is primarily one-sided, it's off-balance, out of kilter, not functioning on all cylinders. It's not spiritually healthy. It's like seeing a marriage relationship where the husband kicks back in his La-Z-boy and shakes his empty tea glass at his wife so she'll come fill it up. I don't think you see that happen and automatically think there isn't something more to marriage than a customer/server relationship. I knew a guy who would do that! ...At least to his first wife.

Our goal in this series is not about what YOU CAN GET out of God... it's not an article on "*9 Ways To Get A Better Return On Your Prayers*", but about how

**SLIDE: A healthy approach to prayer brings you into close alignment with God.**

So I'll say again, **Asking** is a great place to start, but we need to take the next natural step as well, one that balances us towards a healthy, productive relationship with God-- we need to take a look at **Listening**.

Our OT example this week is going to be Abraham, the Big Daddy of God's People! He starts out as Abram, but God affects a name change to reinforce His promise that Abraham would be the Father of many nations, and so for our purposes this morning we'll just stick with that name.

Abraham bursts onto the Genesis scene without much warning. We get a quick glimpse of his genealogy in chapter 11. It's a little wild to think that Abraham was born a bit less than 300 years after Noah's flood! It's the same time gap as 2023 is to 1731, when Georgia, the last of our original 13 colonies, was being established. All we're told about Abraham is who his dad, uncles, and close family were, and Badda-Bing, we're in Genesis chapter 12 reading this:

**SLIDE:** The LORD had said to Abram, “Go from your country, your people and your father’s household to the land I will show you.

“I will make you into a great nation,

and I will bless you;

I will make your name great,

and you will be a blessing.<sup>[a]</sup>

I will bless those who bless you,

and whoever curses you I will curse;

and all peoples on earth

will be blessed through you.”

Genesis 12:1-3

Abraham, who seems pretty much like a nobody at this point, has just heard God! God has spoken directly to him! And then in the next chapter, God speaks to him again!

**SLIDE:** The LORD said to Abram after Lot had parted from him, “Look around from where you are, to the north and south, to the east and west. All the land that you see I will give to you and your offspring forever. I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth, so that if anyone could count the dust, then your offspring could be counted. Go, walk through the length and breadth of the land, for I am giving it to you.”

Genesis 13:14-17

Over the span of chapters 12 through 21 we can follow Abraham’s journey, and if you were wont to do so, I think you’d discover this, that Abraham was incredibly and profoundly... average. Nondescript. Ungifted. Not perfect. Not remarkably intelligent.

And that hurts my feelings just a little bit! Why don’t I get to hear God speak directly to me? I know that seems like a silly question, but I think it may have more merit than you might at first think. You need to take into account that we, as baptized believers saved by the blood of Jesus Christ, have access to something that Abraham didn’t, that being the Spirit of God living inside of us! Yet I don’t hear God making any massive proclamations my direction. So I did some thinking about it, and I believe I have at least a partial answer.

### ***Hearing God Illustration—***

I've invited Darin Grebel to help me out this morning by stepping into the role of God. Scripture tells us repeatedly that as followers of Jesus Christ, we are granted full access to God. In fact, there is no other way to God except through Jesus Christ. That means that, as a follower of Jesus, anytime I want to talk with God, I simply... can!

**Me:** *God, I was outside earlier today, and I was just noticing that even in the dead of winter, there's so much of your creation that's still beautiful and amazing, and I really appreciate that!*

And God, being with me, living in me, caring for me, is available to say things like...

**Darin/God:** *(Darin says something Godly)*

And that's amazing in and of itself! I can speak praise to God, give thanks to God, even ask God to help me make wise choices in life...

**Me:** *God, I've got a decision coming up, and it's been tough figuring out just which way to go. I've got an Option A as well as an Option B. I don't believe either option goes against your commands, but I'd sure love to have your input before I have to make the call.*

**Darin/God:** Actually both opportunities would allow you to make a difference for My Kingdom, but you might enjoy Option A just a bit more!

And this is a *GREAT* set up, this close proximity with the Creator of the Universe, who loves me and sees me and really gets me. But I've got to be honest here... this doesn't represent my daily life! Here's how my life feels...

*(Call up four more assistants from the audience, representing Work, Family, Social Media, & Finances. Introduce each one, having them give a sample statement—"If you get passed over for that promotion, you'll probably be on the street before the year's out!")*

And so often, if not usually, when I am wondering why I'm not hearing more from God, it's because my life sounds like this: *(All five reps begin speaking at once. All but God are voicing concerns, anxieties, and worries related to their particular aspects of life, seasoned with the idea that "If you don't handle this, nobody else will; this is all on YOU!")* Voices should be strident but not overpowering, as Keith will talk over the voices, tapping or taking microphones away from the reps one by one [the four non-God reps will be sharing two mics]. When tapped or a mic is taken, that rep can stop and make their way off-stage, until only God is left speaking in a cool, calm voice.)

**Keith** (during the reps' overspeaking): There's never a shortage of frustrations, anxieties or distractions that will, if allowed, keep you from resting easily, from being at peace. Most of all, there will always be voices that keep you from focusing on the one Voice that you need to hear most, that Voice which belongs to The One who knows you best, knows your best, and leads you to be your best. But it turns out that in order to truly HEAR God, we must very intentionally start to LISTEN for Him.

*(Thank the team and Darin can leave stage)*

Now I said that I had discovered my "hearing problem" to be a PARTIAL answer to why I might not be getting the same mileage with God as Abraham did. I've got more problems than just hearing God *(can I get an Amen? I knew that I could! Darn supportive church family!)* If I'm going to be completely honest, I have to admit that Hearing is not all it's cracked up to be! Some of you know it, too!

Any owner/operators of **adolescent children** here today? Ah, you can tell who sent their high school or middle school kids off to the TN Christian Teen Convention this weekend. They look so carefree and refreshed, like they've got life by the horns and it's not even fighting back! Now this is going to be quite a stretch, but has anyone ever experienced anything like, say... THIS (mime and act out a situation where a parent yells to their teen to take out the trash, but the teen is playing a video game. The teen immediately says "OK!" to the request, but doesn't stop playing. Act out another situation where the teen is on the phone, and is told to get on their homework. They react with an irritated "FINE", but don't hang up the call). Good luck with the hearing issues there!

Or perhaps you have a little one at home. That's a whole different set of challenges. Remember that first time you saw your child with something fragile, or dangerous, or that they simply weren't supposed to have, and you said, "Hey, bring that here!" or "Put that down!" And it was the first time that this very specific, identifiable change came over their face, as they realized that they could say NO! and make a run for it.

I've got an old photo I wanted to share with you today that always comes to my mind when I think about the difference between Hearing and Listening.

**SLIDE: Photo of 1990s Keith and Lydia warming hands at the woodstove**

First let me apologize about my appearance. The 90s were happening to me, and they were merciless!

This is one of my favorite photos from my daughter Lydia's childhood, hands down. Or up, as it were. It was winter in Illinois, and we had a pellet-burning stove; it also would burn a percentage of dried corn, which wasn't hard to come by in Illinois! We were stingy with our heating dollars, and so being near the stove was THE place to be. The only problem was that there was a glass panel in the door of the stove, and you could see the yellow/orange of the flames dancing around in there, and it was pretty. And pretty things are hard to resist! So I made it a point to create this instructional moment so she would know not to get too close to the glass.

"Hot!" I said to her, to which she replied (give audience time to come up with it) "Hot".

"Ouch!" I said to her, to which she replied, "Ouch".

"No NO!" I said to her, pointing to the door, then jerking my hand away. She replied "No no".

Shari took this picture just before Lydia put her finger on the glass.

It may not have really happened, but I have always believed I heard a sizzle when her tiny fingertip touched that glass. And do you know what the first thing she did was, after jerking her finger back? She looked at me to see how much trouble she was in. And right after that, her finger told her brain. There was a second photo,

but it was mostly filled with those little characters above the numbers on your keyboard.

### **Abraham not only heard God... he LISTENED!**

But there is definitely more to this story, because God uses Abraham and his son Isaac to give us one of the most powerful images in history, that story which takes place on Mount Moriah, in Genesis 22.

**SLIDE:** Some time later God tested Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham!"

"Here I am," Abraham replied.

Then God said, "Take your son, your only son, whom you love—Isaac—and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on a mountain I will show you."

#### Genesis 22:1-2

And what plays out is one of the highest dramas in Scripture, as Abraham, Isaac, and their servants travel to the mountain, and then just Abraham and Isaac climb the mountain with the wood and the knife. Isaac questions where the sacrifice is, and Abraham replies simply that God will provide the lamb. They arrange stones into an altar, arrange the wood for the fire. And then Abraham binds Isaac's hands and lay him across the altar.

**SLIDE:** Then he reached out his hand and took the knife to slay his son. But the angel of the LORD called out to him from heaven, "Abraham! Abraham!"

"Here I am," he replied.

"Do not lay a hand on the boy," he said. "Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son."

Abraham looked up and there in a thicket he saw a ram caught by its horns. He went over and took the ram and sacrificed it as a burnt offering instead of his

son. So Abraham called that place The LORD Will Provide. And to this day it is said, "On the mountain of the LORD it will be provided."

Genesis 22:10-14

Wow. I mean... WOW. What a level of listening to God, and of trusting Him! Estimates are that Isaac was a young adult by this time. I can only imagine he had learned a lot from his old father about trusting in God as well, else he surely could have overpowered Abraham. Wow!

And when you put it all together, in the passages we've looked at today, I think you'll find the secret that allowed Abraham to exist in such tight proximity to God, moving in the same direction as God, even though he was, in most respects, quite an average man.

Abraham would rarely ***Ask*** God for anything. Occasionally he would ask for clarification, but as you look through his life, he wasn't known for his Wish List.

Abraham often ***Listened*** to God, undoubtedly. He was one of the best listeners in Scripture! He heard God, and he Listened to God. Do you know what the difference is between Hearing and Listening? The answer to that, and to Abraham's relationship with God, his alignment with the Father, lay in two three-word phrases.

In Genesis 12, when God promises Abraham that he will be a great nation, and that all the peoples of earth will be blessed through him, the next three words are

**SLIDE:** So Abraham went...

In Genesis 13, when God tells Abraham that He will give him all the land he could see, and that his descendants would be as numerous as the grains of dust on the earth, the next three words are

**SLIDE:** So Abraham went...

In the beginning of Genesis 22, when God calls out to Abraham, Abraham's three-word response is

**SLIDE:** Here I am...



Later in that same chapter, as Abraham is about to plunge a knife into his only son, the response comes once again

**SLIDE:** Here I am...

Abraham walks in alignment with God because Abraham is **obedient!** God is able to fulfill all of His promises to Abraham because Abraham obeys. It's not about asking God with the right magic words, the secret incantation. It's not about the right posture or the right timing or the right location or the right lighting or the right clothing. It's about being in an obedient relationship, moving in the same direction as God, WITH God. The closer we ourselves are to being there, not only will we increasingly see results from our prayers, but we will also increasingly experience blessings we didn't even ask for! An obedient relationship with God allows Him to lavish upon us the good He has had in mind for you all along.

We think prayer is when we **ASK** for results... but it's also when we hear our mission.

We think prayer is when we ask for action... but it's also when we should **LISTEN** for direction.

We think prayer is when we persuade God... but it's always where learn to **OBEY** His plans.

**SLIDE:** (ideally these three words would slide in as they come up in the preceding statement)

**ASK**

**LISTEN**

**OBEY**

Optional Illustration: Let me use an example. Shari & I were friends with a married couple some 25 years ago. We were visiting at their house one afternoon and the husband... let's call him Danny... was kicked back in his recliner telling us a story, and his wife is in the kitchen doing something. In the middle of his story Danny drains the last drink of iced tea from his cup, turns his head back a bit towards the kitchen, says "Hey babe", and does this (shakes cup to rattle the ice), and keeps on with whatever it was he was talking about. I'll be honest, I don't think I heard anything else he said that day. He shook that ice at his wife, and she came in, picked up the cup, took it into the kitchen, and brought it back filled with iced tea.

Pardon my Italian, but great googly moogly! I don't remember much else about that visit, but on the ride home it was pretty quiet in the car up until I cleared my throat and Shari said, "Don't even dream it."

No, that's not true it all; we were very much on the same page. At the time we were coming up on our 15<sup>th</sup> year of marriage, and the couple we were visiting were married twice that, but it was like we had just witnessed a stage of deconstruction in the marriage relationship! That was NOT the relationship that we wanted, that we were working towards. There was something about his level of wordless expectation that simply wasn't healthy, wasn't indicative of a great partnership. They were existing half-way through a give-and-take situation that, quite honestly, couldn't take much more. And didn't. I could tell you more, but the more I told, the less you'd want to hear.