

DAVIS BUNN
THE TURNING
DEVOTIONAL



river
north

FICTION FROM MOODY PUBLISHERS

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DAVIS BUNN

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INTRODUCTION

Does God still speak to us today?

In *The Turning*, a group of believers become convinced that God has asked them to take a bold step of faith. Here is a description: “The message was unexpected but unambiguous. A voice resonated from a distance and somehow from within. Against all earthly logic, it carried a divine command. And five very different people knew they were summoned to obey.”

This theme taps into something we are already drawn toward. At the heart of the Christian life is the hunger for a deeper connection with the divine. We yearn for the transformation that might come if only we listened more closely. The natural question is: how can I make such a message from God real in my own life?

Nothing I say here can provide absolute assurance. We must understand that a communication from God is a direct and personal experience. Here at the outset, you should ask yourself:

- Do I hunger for this?
- If God speaks, is it in words?
- What does it mean to prepare myself to hear him?
- How can I overcome the barriers in my life that keep me from being still?
- Am I worthy to have God speak to me directly, individually?

The aim of these forty lessons is to help supply answers to all the above questions, except the first: Do you hunger for this form of direct communion with our Lord?

You must decide if this sort of experience calls to you. If so, please commit now to spending a few minutes every day for the next forty days on preparing yourself. The amount of time is less important than the daily commitment. Five minutes, ten, whatever feels comfortable.

These lessons are intended to be both down-to-earth and easy to follow. Listening to God is a *universal desire*. This means that all such lessons should be accessible enough for us all to take to heart, regardless of our circumstances.

The easiest question to answer is the last. No one is worthy. All have fallen short. But our Savior has granted us entry into the divine presence. Rest assured of this. Move beyond any such fears or sense of inadequacy. Set aside your doubts. And let us begin.

LESSON ONE

Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I. Send me!"

Isaiah 6:8

We all want to be ready when God speaks. The question we need to ask is, how do we prepare for that event?

The issue has been of intense interest to believers since Old Testament times. In the coming days, we will discuss how they spoke of this, and what they did. But here at the outset, we need to address one question first: Do you yearn for a greater space in your life where God might dwell and work?

The simple fact is, if you knew what to do in order to bind yourself closer to the Father, more than likely the step would already have been taken. But *asking* and *doing* have only taken you so far.

Now may be the time to learn the discipline of attentiveness.

Over the next forty days, we will study a series of straightforward steps that can, if you are willing, bring you to a clearer understanding of what is meant by the discipline of listening, or attentiveness, or patience. All three of these terms refer to the same act. Be still. Be alert. Be ready to receive.

We begin with a lesson that has been taught since the Desert Fathers, in the era immediately following our Savior's death:

- When listening to God, it is important that you: *Set no goals.*
- There are three reasons for this:
 1. First, you need to allow God to set the agenda. Too often the temptation we face is to put words into God's mouth. When we are being attentive, it is important that we accept that we don't have the answer, we don't know what is needed. We learn to listen, so that God may redirect our attention.
 2. Second, success here is not measured by God delivering a message. The aim is for us to learn what it means to be attentive. God will speak as he wills, when he wills, and in the manner he deems best.

3. Finally, it is important to remember that we are not after perfect silence. God invites us simply to make room for him. Nothing more. The perfection is left up to him.

LESSON TWO

“The wisdom I proclaim is God’s hidden wisdom, which he had already chosen for our glory even before the world was made.”

1 Corinthians 2:7 GNB

Through learning the discipline of attentiveness, we join in a tradition set in place by the early Protestants four hundred years ago. One key reason for the Protestant Reformation was that believers sought to retake control of their walk in faith. They wanted to forge a deeper connection directly between themselves and their Lord. As a result, they developed a group of common practices that they called the spiritual disciplines. Among these were prayer, study of Scriptures, tithing, and listening to God.

- While prayer is the act of speaking *to* God, the discipline of listening is an act of *making ready*. These days, silence is often seen as the impossible barrier. In truth, silence never came easy to most believers.
- But as these early followers discovered, listening is nowhere as difficult as some make it out to be.
- We do not stop praying simply because our prayers are not perfect. The same is true for the discipline of listening. God’s gift of His perfect Son is our beacon here. We do what we can, we take the first step, and trust our Father to reach across the impossible divide and bring us home.
- In the coming days we will form a series of Bible-based concepts to help you achieve a clearer understanding of what it means to be spiritually attentive.
- We are not here to discuss theory. This is an exercise in *drawing near*. So at this point, two concrete steps need to be taken.
 1. First, commit now to spending a few minutes each day for the next forty days in silent attentiveness. Three minutes, five, ten, twenty. Once each day, twice, these are decisions you can take along the way. What is important now is to *commit*.
 2. Begin now.

LESSON THREE

“Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.”

James 4:10

An active part of humbling ourselves before God is accepting that our strength is not enough. That alone we cannot accomplish what needs doing. We want to grow closer to God. This is a theme that runs through the lives of most believers. When we have a moment to reflect on our relationship with God, we feel the soft yearning to draw near. And yet for many of us, another action is not the answer. Our lives are already too full of doing. What we may feel called to at his point is to stop and allow God to approach us in his own miraculous way. Too often the barrier is not a lack of desire, but rather a flawed concept of what attentiveness means. Remember what was said in lesson one: The goal is not perfection. The goal is to try.

- Since the first moment of giving our lives to Jesus, our souls have hungered for a deeper connection to our Lord. We yearn for the wisdom that might come if we listened more closely, and God spoke.
- When we stop using an impossible goal of perfect silence as a barrier to listening at all, we discover that the simple act of *trying* carries great reward.
- Therefore make a pledge to *try*. Beginning right now, set aside a small segment of your day. Give what you can—twenty minutes, ten, five.
- Do not seek perfection. Do not intend to completely separate yourself from the pressures and noise of your life. But do take a small step each day.
- And in so doing, you will discover what our fellow believers have known for centuries. That the act of listening can be a time of not just peace, but arrival.
- Starting right now.

LESSON FOUR

“As the mountains surround Jerusalem, so the Lord surrounds his people, both now and forevermore.”
Psalm 125: 2

Some of us are anxious about the act of listening because we fear the voices and urges we hear inside our minds. Some believers are concerned that the discipline of attentiveness may bring them into greater contact with those aspects of our thoughts and emotions that they are already struggling with.

- A different perspective can be taken here. By so doing, our concerns are transformed from a barrier into an *opportunity*.
- First, remember that God has placed in you this desire to draw near for a reason. He calls to you, and despite all the pressures and tumult and memories and emotions you experience, you yearn to respond.
- By taking this first step, by committing to the act of disciplined listening, you open a door through which God can help you deal with whatever internal barrier that concerns or frightens you.
- If this is the case, begin your times of listening with a Bible passage like the one above, which anchors in place the blessed assurance that God is with you, that he wants you to come, that he seeks to use this time to help you become free you of these issues.
- Take a moment to find your own special passage, one that speaks to your heart about God’s protective presence. And then dwell in attentiveness for a few moments.
- If any turmoil or memory arises and clouds your time, do not fight it. Simply turn it over to God. Return to your Bible passage. Then devote another few minutes to listening.

LESSON FIVE

“Commit your way to the Lord; trust in him and he will do this: He will make your righteous reward shine like the dawn, your vindication like the noonday sun.”

Psalm 37:5–6

When we face challenges, our normal reaction is to pray and ask God for a specific response. But what if God has a different answer to our issue? In fact, what if the issue itself is the stimulus to help us draw closer to him?

What if our prayer request is not in line with God’s direction? And what if this is the reason he has been silent?

We need his help; we accept that we do *not* know what is required and so we use this issue as a reason to *stop and listen*.

- There are few things more unsettling than to feel helpless, turn to God, and receive only silence in return. When the dark hours become crowded with our weakness, God can seem very distant, and our strength of no benefit. But sometimes such moments of divine silence contain a powerful hidden gift.
- Think back to a time when your need was great, your hour dark, and God remained silent. Name the hour and speak the need.
- Consider now where you are. Where your faith has brought you. What resolution you have known.
- Is there a lesson here? Can you see God’s hand at work? Did the silence itself play a role in drawing you closer to him?
- By learning to listen, even when God *appears* not to respond, we prepare ourselves for whatever he might seek to teach us, and however he might choose to speak.

LESSON SIX

“I, by your great love, can come into your house; in reverence I bow down toward your holy temple.”
Psalm 5:7

For many of us, if we were asked to describe these early days of listening to God, our reply could likely be just one word: scattered. scattered. There are several issues that need to be addressed now, and then returned to over the course of the next few weeks.

1. First and foremost, it is important that you be gentle with yourself. Remember what was said in the first lesson: Set no goals. The idea of perfection, if applied to your times of listening, can actually become a barrier to even trying.

2. Second, remember the key two components to our task: *Discipline* and *Listening*.

- The act of listening for a few minutes needs to become a regular component of each day. And there needs to be a steadiness to the practice. In other words, whatever means you use for focusing, hold to this for a minimum of one week.
- As you grow in this process, the length of time may increase to where you hold to a particular task or verse for as long as a month. But that is for later. Right now, try and commit to whatever you do for a minimum of seven days. If you read of another concept that excites you, no matter how strong the draw, hold to the first task for the full week. The method is actually less important at this stage than coming to understand the meaning of discipline.
- It is important to remember that your thoughts are not your enemies. No emotion that arises, no impression, no recollection, no experience, none of this is bad or wrong or something to criticize. You are simply moving through various issues. When you recognize that you have strayed from the task of listening, simply release the thought or the emotion. Even if your time is over, sit and listen for just a moment, so that this is the final moment, the concluding breath. Then rise and return to your day.
- For many believers, these lessons are the first time that you have ever consciously tried to apply such a concept of discipline to your thought process. Your mind has been allowed to go wherever it wants, at whatever speed, in any direction. Most of us desire a better handle on this. Very few are able to clench down hard enough at a mental level actually to control their thoughts, and

for those who do, too often this becomes a pressure cooker—sooner or later the force builds up and the lid explodes off. A key to applying discipline to thoughts is through the first two words that opened today’s lesson: Be Gentle. Allow the thoughts and emotions to rise, become aware of them, and release them. Return to the task of attentiveness. Gradually this will strengthen in intensity and in time.

LESSON SEVEN

“You have led in your steadfast love the people whom you redeemed; you have guided them by your strength to your holy abode.”

Exodus 15:13 ESV

One of the questions most asked about the discipline of listening is, does God communicate to us without words? And the answer is, all the time. The *real* issue we must face is this: Are we attentive when he reveals himself? Are we listening closely enough to hear the unspoken?

- Scriptures constantly witness to God’s presence through the glory of his creation, and through the works he does in his servants. What is more, we often find his clearest messages in the examination of what he does *not* say through words.
- Through our learning to be attentive, we become increasingly aware of God’s presence in the breath of our lives.
- One glorious example of this in the simple exercise of taking stock. Try to identify one way your life has changed that seems beyond either your understanding or your abilities. Could this be a gift of divine intervention?
- The silent presence of God is often described as something *out there*. But one of the beautiful aspects of learning to listen is how this awareness extends *beyond the moment of listening*. Over time our ability to witness God’s presence, even in the deepest stillness, becomes a natural component of our lives. And with this comes a new definition for the word, gratitude.

LESSON EIGHT

“Come near to God, and he will come near to you.”

James 4:8

Today we return to the issue of God speaking, but not always in words. One key element of the discipline of listening is to prepare ourselves to receive such silent communications.

Sometimes the presence of God arrives not in a rush of power, but a soft whisper of coincidence. In the hurried sprint of modern life, it is all too easy to overlook the importance of a chance meeting, or the quiet breath of unexpected experience, as a gift carrying eternal significance.

- All too often, we expect the act of attentiveness to be rewarded with a revelation, a direct communication in word or vision, that transforms your very existence. But remember what we said in the very first lesson: *Set no goals*.
- Through the centuries, many church leaders have noted that the most important reward from disciplined listening are *experiential*. By this they mean, God has *revealed* himself, or one of his attributes.
- Tomorrow’s lesson will consider such experiences of some church leaders while listening to God. For now, let us focus upon one key element to all their teachings: *We can only share with others what we have experienced for ourselves*.
- In drawing near to God, we discover a more intimate understanding of vital lessons. The concepts of peace, of love, and of hope all take on whole new meanings.
- Here is the glory of God’s gift revealed. By knowing joy, you can reveal joy. By knowing peace, you can reveal peace. By experiencing the power of God’s eternal illumination, your life can become a beacon.
- Commit yourself to knowing, so that you may reveal.

LESSON NINE

“That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of Life.”

1 John 1:1

Many believers approach the discipline of listening with some ambivalence. They desire a more direct and effective experience, yet they also dread it. In the coming days we will look at such fears over hearing from God, and how this fear might be transformed. Today, let us look at what this experience actually means.

Moses, Ezekiel, Paul, and many other biblical figures saw the splendor of God and were affected in ways that completely transformed their lives. Throughout the twenty centuries since our Lord walked this earth, countless believers have been changed in the very same manner.

Since the dawn of the Protestant movement, these experiences have been referred to as an *epiphany*. The word signifies a vision from God with the power to last a lifetime. From such a communication arises a transformative desire to serve God and his people in a new way.

Here are a few accounts of such experiences, to light our own way forward:

- The Emperor Constantine saw the cross imprinted upon the sun, and went on to win a battle against an army ten times the size of his own—and as a result brought Christianity to the Roman Empire.
- Augustine (fifth-century church leader) had a vision of light so profound it burned away a lifetime of bitterness and regret, and drew him into a ministry that still has an impact on church thinking sixteen hundred years later.
- John Bunyan had a vision of Jesus Christ seated at the right hand of God, leading him to dedicate his remaining life and his writings to “Christ! Christ! There is nothing but Christ before my eyes!”
- John Wesley had a vision of heaven and spent the rest of his life trying to help an entire world gain entry.

- Mother Teresa saw Christ in the midst of a huge crowd of anguished poor, and he asked her to share with them his love. Which she did, for the rest of her days.
- Martin Luther King Jr. had a vision that for the rest of his life he called “My Dream of a Beloved Community,” where all people lived in peace and filled with God’s love. It powered his work in the Civil Rights movement and inspired one of the most profound speeches of all time: *I Have a Dream*.
- Moving forward, it is important that a desire for such experiences not frame your expectations. Remember the first day’s lesson: Set no goals. Yet we should accept that through the ages, God has revealed himself, and done so in ways that have altered the course of history. In their writings, all the above leaders credited the vital role the discipline of listening has played in their faith.

LESSON ELEVEN

“I wait for the Lord, my whole being waits, and in his word I put my hope. I wait for the Lord, more than the watchmen wait for the morning. . . . Put your hope in the Lord, for with the Lord is unfailing love, and with him is full redemption.”

Psalm 130:5–7

Stepping away from the great visions, we come to the crux of disciplined listening: Learning a new meaning for the word *patience*.

Patience, like prayer, is a discipline best practiced daily. For most people, it does not come easy. In today’s world, it can often feel unnatural. But this does not make the discipline of patience any less important. The discipline of patience holds a number of remarkable gifts. Sitting in silence, learning to still the mind if only for a brief instant, creates a space in which God can both move and act.

- The unique element of hope born in faith is that it is not *self-reliant*. We know this, and yet all too often we seek to withdraw the trust in God and place it instead in our own strength, our own actions.
- Often we become so ensnared by the world’s call to arms that we forget the simple grace to be found in stopping, asking God, and waiting for his response.
- The act of waiting can at times become the greatest separation between the will of man, and the will of the Maker. Wisdom often springs from such times. We relinquish our grip on the world. We take a mental, emotional, and spiritual step back. The practice of patience then becomes another form of prayer, when we learn that the simple act of waiting upon God is a gift. Regardless of whether God enters into that moment. The waiting itself is a gift.
- We open a space, a brief instant removed from our frenetic pace, and ask God to fill it. The *act of waiting* holds powerful insights. We are granted a *new perspective* on the world. The veil of emotion or fatigue or stress or worry is cleared away.
- For this one brief moment, set down your tools. Unburden your life. Release the yoke. Close your eyes and do this now.
- And wait. Two minutes. Five. Pray, ask, seek, and wait.

LESSON TWELVE

“There is a God in heaven who reveals secrets.”

Daniel 2:28 (NLT)

Daniel was a man who prepared himself for the moments when God sought to use him. He retreated to his tower room. He prayed, he fasted, and he restricted the types of food he ate. Daniel’s preparations are not necessarily your own. Still, it is important for you to accept that preparations may be required, so that in the moment when God communicates, we are truly prepared to extend our awareness beyond the scope of human understanding.

Consider two such ways.

1. Some aspect of your life or emotions or thinking process might repeatedly arise during your quiet time. This may also take the form of recalling some past action or event. The temptation here is to be flooded with shame, or regret, or even rage. Remember what was said about such moments in earlier lessons: When you become aware that your focus has strayed, release the emotions without struggle, and return to disciplined listening.

- Afterwards, you may come to realize that a call has been placed upon your heart to change some aspect of your life. It is important to recognize this for what it is: God has revealed himself through this gentle invitation. And no matter how hard this task may first appear, remember that God will be there with you through it all. His power and his wisdom and his love are yours to call upon.

□ 2. Such changes might arise in the form of a desire to make some definite act that anchors your new discipline of listening in a concrete fashion. One common means is through fasting.

- Such abstinence need not be about food. It can be a period of not speaking, and can last as little as several hours. It can be from shopping. Or using the Internet. Or anything else in your life that holds you back from arriving at a point of internal calm.

- Remember, this is not a definite requirement. This is between you and God. But if such an invitation is made, it is done so with love and with one aim in mind: To bring you closer to your Lord.

- Such practices might appear insignificant at first. But these outward efforts can serve a vital purpose, one far beyond merely anchoring your time of attentiveness. They can also help prepare you for the arrival of a spiritual gift.
- Spiritual gifts, including that of hearing when God speaks, do not simply arise in polished form. They are diamonds drawn from raw beginnings, with great potential value, but only after they are carved and polished and made ready.
- What step might you take to be better able and ready to hear God?
- Remember, God does not call you to do the impossible. Above all else, God wants you to *succeed*. He will *reward your efforts*. He will *pave the way* so that the next step, whatever it might be, comes naturally.

LESSON THIRTEEN

“God has made us what we are, and in our union with Christ Jesus he has created for us a life of good deeds, which he has already prepared for us to do.”

Ephesians 2:10 (GNT)

When we sense that God is inviting us to act, or accept a duty, or give love in a particular situation, we can feel that it is too much. The invitation calls us to do something beyond our abilities or the time and energy we have. In the tumult and confusion that sometimes fills our daily life, the good deeds that God sets before us can seem impossible. Or we do them, but afterwards wish they had been done better, or with more love, or in a different way. This is not a new issue. The apostle Paul himself speaks of this.

- The risk here is to see only our failings. And that is not what God intends. Instead, His holy aim is for us to recognize that in any number of ways, with a multitude of topics, we cannot succeed on our own.
- We need him and his guidance. What is more, God *wants* us to need him.
- In order to bring forth our need and to receive God’s guidance, we need to isolate an action or calling where we are certain that we cannot succeed on our own. Have you recently experienced the sense of God asking for you to take the unlikely step? Has your daily life held a cloaked request from the divine?
- If so, spend some time today reflecting on this. Write it out. Tomorrow’s lesson will apply the discipline of attentiveness to such events.

LESSON FOURTEEN

“Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.”

Psalm 51:10–12

Yesterday we began looking at when our time of disciplined listening might result in a sense that God has placed a call on our lives. Remember, success does not merely signify getting the job done or resolving the issue or ending the crisis. Success requires a solution that is pleasing to God.

- Return to that one specific issue you isolated yesterday, the project or task or duty or responsibility where you know you can only succeed with God’s help.
- Focus on the identified task. Imagine that you take this task and lay it on the altar—a sacred place that reminds us of God’s power but also of our need to worship and obey him. And then step back. Do not specify the answer you want. Simply wait for God’s direction.
- Spend a few moments in surrender, granting God the respect of as clear and quiet a mind as you can manage. Then leave the task on the altar and turn away.
- Commit to doing this every day for one week. And during that time, practice the discipline of waiting. Give God room to act. Your only duty is to be vigilant for his response.
- See this not just as a problem, but also an opportunity. Because of this need, you are learning the discipline of daily intent. Pray over it, then wait in silence and listen for guidance.
- At the end of this week, take another look at this question. Has God begun to reveal an answer?
- If so, do two things in thanks.
 1. First, acknowledge his love and care.
 2. Second, acknowledge how your attitude in coming before God— committed, open, attentive, humble, patient—has played a role in this solution.

LESSON FIFTEEN

“When the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we have done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life.”

Titus 3:4–7

In our struggles and our fervor, we sometimes lose sight of the one eternal strand that links us forever to the love of God. The eternal gift of salvation, in its most perfect and exquisite form, is ours.

As many teachers and church leaders have practiced the discipline of listening, they have found themselves drawn repeatedly to some particular aspect of Christ’s gift. In the coming lessons, we will discuss in detail the use of images in learning daily attentiveness. For now, the key message is this: When you feel drawn to dwell on some component of Christ’s message or teaching or sacrifice, do so.

Remember what we said earlier: You are learning the discipline of listening, and one component of this is that such a shift be applied for a minimum of one week. Before you begin, write out whatever was the foundation for your practice up to that point. You may well find that this consideration of Christ has resulted in a subtle shift in your vision to the original issue.

- The concept of discipleship is based around one key goal. God wishes us to use this gift of salvation, and grow in faith. We are invited to use our few human hours to learn what lessons we can from our Savior’s example. We are asked to give thanks. We are asked to grow in Spirit. We are asked to help our fellow man. We are asked to seek His will. And we are asked to live in peace and love.
- Part of putting these divine requests into action requires separating ourselves from the pressures of life, and making time to listen, to heal, and to grow.
- As the gift has been freely given, we must do nothing except receive.
- How difficult are these simple requests to put into action! How the world seeks to blind us with a veil of worry and woe. And yet here too is the wondrous opportunity to see God’s power at work in our lives.

- Pray these words now: “As you calm the seas, O Lord, so calm my heart. Clear away the storms of life so that I might see your will more clearly. Make in me a new hope, grant me the strength to look with peace upon whatever is your will for me this day. Amen.”

LESSON SIXTEEN

“Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake came a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper.”

1 Kings 19:11–12

There is a great lesson to be found in this beautiful passage. God has a divine purpose behind his method of personal revelation. Were he to arrive with the sweep of grandeur, the crashing of trumpets and the shaking of creation, we would have no choice but heed his call.

- Instead, his method of communication carries the same incredible gift as his offer of salvation. We, his most unique of creations, are given the *choice* to hear his call. We have been bestowed with the magnificent favor of *free will*.
- In speaking with us in such a soft and delicate fashion, he invites us to *turn away from the world and toward God*. For the brief moment of our communion, we are asked to set aside the noise and passion and fervor of modern life. We are asked to listen to what we can perceive only when we are at our most attentive. When we yearn for his voice. When we have made ourselves ready.
- This closer communion is at the core of our learning this discipline of daily attentiveness. As we grow in our awareness, we will come face to face with the hunger at the very center of our being, the yearning to draw near. Then we are ready to hear what is too often lost in the roar of life.
- It is for this reason that we quieten ourselves, just for an instant, turn away from this world and toward God.

LESSON SEVENTEEN

“Let your work appear to your servants, and your glory to their children. And let the beauty of the Lord our God be upon us, and establish the work of our hands for us.”

Psalm 90:16–17 (NKJV)

Over the next two days we will examine the process of using images as a part of the discipline of listening.

By this point, some people will feel a certain frustration over their inability to be as still and silent as they would like. The most important thing to remember at such moments is that, like any form of exercise, even the duller days carries a huge benefit. Simply building the process into your life helps you arrive at a point where the concepts of silence and attentiveness take on whole new meanings. Be patient. Set no goals. Trust in God to grant this exercise an eternal value.

For some, using an image to help focus the mind can be very beneficial. This exercise actually carries a powerful bond with the earliest days of our church family. Using an image from the Scriptures to help still the mind has been applied for over eighteen hundred years.

- There are three crucial elements to using an image in your silent time.

1. The first is, it must be biblically based. Our aim in listening is to draw closer to God, and grant His Holy Spirit a space to move and breathe in our lives. Basing this upon Scriptures is vital.

2. Second, any such visualization must come naturally. Some people find it difficult to hold a mental image for very long. If there is any sense of discomfort in the process, you should go back to the simple act of listening, or use another technique. We will discuss several others in the coming days. This process is for those who find holding such an image helps them free their minds from words, and grants them a space removed from daily life and worldly pressures.

3. And third, it should be used over time. It is important that you not skip from image to image, or verse to verse. Use the same verse and the same image daily for at least one week, so that you learn what it means to rest in it.

LESSON EIGHTEEN

“Trust in the Lord and do good: dwell in the land and enjoy safe pasture. Take delight in the Lord and he will give you the desires of your heart.”

Psalm 37:3–4

We return today to our study of using images in our quiet times. To recap yesterday’s lesson, there are three elements to doing this successfully: The image must be biblically based, the technique must come naturally to you, and the same image should be used for at least a week.

The discipline of patience, learning to listen to God, requires a conscious act of setting aside. These brief periods of listening need to become structured, so that they are both maintained and returned to easily.

Comfortably fit this into your schedule. Avoid any sense of strain that would make you reluctant to continue tomorrow, and with no out sized goals to impede the joy of this time. For that is how you should see this. You are making a happy time, when you can step back from the heady rush of life and dwell in God’s secure peace.

Let us use today’s Bible passage as an example, and show how an image might be shaped around it:

- Take a moment read the above passage several times. Then shut your eyes. Imagine yourself resting in a place you have visited or know intimately, perhaps a field or meadow or park or shoreline that holds special significance.
- The wind blows softly, the sun warms you. You have been here before, you know the place well. You are surrounded by safety and sheltered in a peace that transcends the day and the pressures that await you beyond the meadow.
- See yourself setting down your worries and your needs and your goals. Just for a moment. Allow yourself to become unburdened. If you find yourself distracted, simply release the thoughts and return.
- You discover that you are not alone. The Maker of this place, and the One who gave you the insight and power of imagination is there with you. The most important aspect of his presence is safety. The first component of peace. Knowing that you are shielded from all that awaits you beyond the meadow.

- Stay there for a few minutes. Then return. There is no pressure to this act, no expectation to perform or hear or do anything more than go, rest, and return. God does not want this to be difficult. He *invites* you to be with him. See this not as an exercise but a joy. His instructions are very simple: Come.

LESSON NINETEEN

“One thing I do know; I was blind, but now I see!”

John 9:25

When we read, we give no notice to the spaces between the words. And yet those pauses are vital. Without them, there is nothing but a senseless jumble. With them, thoughts are unique, words are clear, ideas fashioned, lives transformed. So it is with the brief pauses we make to stop and listen. Our thoughts and actions take on new clarity.

- The act of listening carries rewards from day one. The discipline in and of itself reduces the jumble and creates those tiny spaces in which, God willing, wisdom arises.
- God often speaks in a whisper, and God’s timing is all his own. We discover that the divine message often does not arrive in this moment we fashion, but later. Because even when we return to the heady rush of thoughts and responsibilities, the discipline of awareness remains intact.
- Mark whatever impression is forthcoming, if indeed it carries the sense of divine intent. At that moment, the clarity and the intensity are unmistakable. We think—we assume—it will stay with us forever.
- But the moment fades, the voice is drowned out by whatever comes next. Unless we stop, create a space, write it down, acknowledge the wisdom for what it is: a gift to fill the space we made. For him.
- Have you received such a gift of wisdom and let it slip away? Will you commit to pausing the next time and making note? Do you have one that has arrived recently and remains fresh? If so, stop now, write it down, and give thanks for the wisdom you are learning to recognize.

LESSON TWENTY

Because of the vital role it plays in the discipline of listening, we return today to an issue we discussed earlier—thoughts that arise during our quiet time.

By now, many of us will be gaining a sense of peace in some of the daily exercises. There arises a growing ability to reach beyond our tightly wound mental state. But all too often our thoughts swirl up, and abruptly we discover that we have been carried away, and the time set apart for this exercise is gone.

At such moments, remember this: Criticizing yourself, or feeling frustration over your momentary lapse, is counterproductive.

- Once again we return to that first lesson. Set no goals. There is nothing wrong with this temporary intrusion of thoughts. It is natural. It is human.
- The important issue is your response. When you fault yourself, you set up unnecessary internal conflict. You create a barrier against maintaining the daily practice.
- Simply acknowledge that your mind has become active. How could it not, since you have always allowed your mind to roam at will? For many people, this is the first time they have sought to discipline their thinking and take a moment to be still.
- When your thoughts arise, don't fight, don't struggle, don't criticize. Just be aware. Allow them to depart as naturally as they arrived. Return to your still state. Focus on this for a moment or two. Then stop for the day.
- And most important of all, remember that just by trying, just by setting aside these few minutes, you have succeeded.

LESSON TWENTY-ONE

“Whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God.”

John 3:21

As the discipline of listening strengthens, unsettling issues may surface. The daily practice of making a quiet space in which God might move can serve as a mirror. It is normal to have memories arise or emotions associated with some past event. You might also find yourself confronting an unwelcome aspect of your current life.

Consider two very important responses to such times. First, do not fight. Treat these experiences the same way you would a distracting thought—recognize it has happened, release it, and return to your quiet space for a moment or two. Understand that if you could have fought your way out of whatever this is, if you could have suppressed it or erased it, you would have already done so. For this one moment, stop fighting. Simply acknowledge the issue and turn away.

The second response is equally vital: Recognize this issue or emotion or memory has arisen here and now for a divine purpose. You have been unable to handle this on your own. God is entering into this space, this quiet time, and is there to help you. His strength will see you through. His miracles await.

Our hearts yearn for divine communion. Yet we are frightened by the prospect of having our innermost shadows revealed. But whatever stain we might feel we carry, whatever veil separates us from seeing God’s presence more clearly, we must always remember one promise: God already knows us intimately. And despite it all, we are forgiven. The slate is cleared. His Son has made the sacrifice for us. Accept this. Do as God wants. Come.

- For those who are comfortable with visualization, here is an exercise to apply in such moments. Earlier you went to a meadow or park, a place where you saw yourself enter easily, where you felt safe and secure, where God dwelled with you. Go there now.
- As you enter the park, visualize a tree. Its branches are strong enough to support whatever weight you carry with you, whatever burden holds you down.
- See yourself hanging your secret burdens there on the branches of this tree. This is why it is there. This is why it was formed. Leave your burdens there. Every one of them.
- Enter into the meadow with a sense of release and gratitude.

LESSON TWENTY-TWO

“Above all, you must live as citizens of heaven, conducting yourselves in a manner worthy of the Good News about Christ. Then, whether I come and see you again or only hear about you, I will know that you are standing together with one spirit and one purpose, fighting together for the faith, which is the Good News.’

Philippians 1:27 (NLT)

To help still the mind, an alternative to using images is to focus on one’s breath. It all depends on each individual. The principles remain the same. Begin with a Scripture reading. Remain with this practice for a minimum of one week. See if it resonates naturally with you.

- For some people, it may be enough to do a Bible reading, then sit and wait upon the Lord. For most, however, the mind is too active, and outside pressures simply too great. They need something to focus on.
- Breathing can be a useful tool in such cases. Again, the key is to read one Bible passage, just one, so that you are grounded in the Word. Then shut your eyes and breathe naturally. Listen to your breath.
- When thoughts crowd in, remember the earlier lesson. Do not fight. Do not struggle. Simply acknowledge it has happened and release them. Return to your breathing for a minute or so.
- Remember what we said in the very first lesson: Set no goals. Your aim is to open a space that is set apart from your normal, active mental state. One where God can act, if he so chooses.

LESSON TWENTY-THREE

“Whoever belongs to God hears what God says.”

John 8:47

How can you be certain that a message is indeed from God? You must of course learn to be aware of the uniqueness of God’s voice. But confidence in your ability to listen and discern is also essential. Here, then, are three aspects of correct listening that should be applied to all such experiences.

1. First, the message is in harmony with God’s Word. The Bible is your anchor. This is God’s message made incarnate. Study the Holy Book, and seek a resonance in your heart and in your daily life. Dwell in these passages. Write them on your heart. Whatever you discover in these times of listening must reflect the timeless treasure of Scripture.

2. Second, the message must be in harmony with your trusted confidants within the church. The need for elders or mentors or prayer partners is vital. Find at least one and if possible several people who walk with you through this experience. What they know of Bible and what they know of you will help clarify all such messages.

3. Third, the message encourages your growth in discipleship. God’s communication is rarely intended simply to reassure. While consolation is a blessing, look for something more. God’s message is often one of moving forward. Discipleship is a process of continual growth. Responding as a willing disciple will often pull you beyond your comfort zone.

- At the same time, the great teachers throughout the life of our church all stress the same point: Such communications are not the aim of your time of attentiveness.
- One great risk that such experiences carry is that we think we are special. In fact, we have done nothing. It is God who has done it all.
- Another risk is that we measure all future times of prayerful listening by this yardstick. Here again we must return to where we started. Remember the first day’s lesson: Set no goals.
- The true measure of any spiritual experience is this: Has it made us a better servant? Are we better able to speak and give in love? Do we better understand the Holy Spirit’s desire for us to show compassion and mercy to all?

LESSON TWENTY-FOUR

“Though he slay me, yet will I hope in him.”

Job 13:15

Prayer can also be a beautiful instrument for entering into the times of disciplined listening. Just remember to focus on approaching God in openness and silence. So the chosen prayer should be one that helps set this compass direction.

- One of my favorites, relied upon by believers for centuries, goes like this: *In this small hour, O Lord, make your voice be the only voice I hear.*
- As with the other methods of learning the discipline of listening, utilize the same prayer for a minimum of one week. See this as a doorway that you approach the same way each day.
- Begin each quiet time with the same Bible passage for one week. Read it carefully through once or twice. Say your prayer. Then wait upon the Lord.
- Try and see this passage of Scriptures as a word spoken directly to you by a dear and beloved friend. Then you wait, for three minutes or five or ten, however long you have, in case this same dear friend wishes to tell you anything else.
- Remember, whatever thoughts that might arise and pull you away are not an indication of failure. Thoughts or emotions are not to be fought against. Simply acknowledge that your attention has wandered and return to the act of listening.

LESSON TWENTY-FIVE

“How precious also are your thoughts to me, O God! How vast is the sum of them! Were I to count them, they would out number the grains of sand—when I awake, I am still with you.”

Psalm 139:17–18

There is a meaningful difference between being silent and listening well. The first is self-directed. You are focused upon silencing your thoughts, keeping your mind still, being aware of your internal state.

Listening is about turning outwards. Listening requires you to be attentive. Stillness is the first step. Beyond stillness comes attentiveness.

- The challenge lies in accepting that your success does not lie in hearing God speak. Your responsibility begins and ends with one simple task: *Being ready*. This is the crucial lesson for today. Defining success in this entire series of exercises comes down to one simple word. Readiness. Everything else is out of your hands.
- You are successful each and every moment that you are attentive. Your goal is not to make God speak. That is out of your control. It sounds simple, but during the moment when you seek to still yourself, how often have you counted the moment as wasted because you sensed no divine connection? These exercises will, in time, God willing, bring you to this point. But when that happens, *how* that occurs, is not your aspiration.
- Prepare yourself. And accept each moment when you have listened well as a triumph. You have achieved a great thing. You have separated yourself from a culture that scorns the need to listen well. You have isolated yourself from a whirlwind of distractions.
- And, God willing, you will discover that the simple act of listening brings untold rewards.

LESSON TWENTY-SIX

“Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand.”

Romans 5:1–2

Much of what we’ve been discussing has to do with worship in solitude. But fellow believers also play a vital role in this process. The importance of standing with other believers cannot be overemphasized. They assist in maintaining clarity and ensure that your message reflects God’s will as revealed in Scriptures. From the earliest days of our faith, mentors have been considered a crucial element to learning the discipline of listening.

- Do you personally know individuals whose lives reflect a keen desire to stay in harmony with God’s Holy Word? You should appreciate their knowledge of the Scripture and how they apply this knowledge to their daily lives.
- It is important to identify those who are encouraging by nature. For this particular exercise, seek out those whose natural tendency is to lift up and advance.
- Then consider which of these people might grant you time when you need it.
- Share with them your desire to draw closer to God, if you have not done so already. Ask if they might be willing to pray with you, and serve as a mirror to yourself during this time of learning and discovery.

LESSON TWENTY-SEVEN

“Praise Him—he is your God, and you have seen with your own eyes the great and astounding things that he has done for you.”

Deuteronomy 10:21 (GNT)

Down through the centuries, noted teachers have spoken of the discipline of listening in a number of beautiful ways. Here is a sample:

- In the second century, a desert father named Evagrius wrote that the discipline of listening helps us return to our most basic need. Because God is most eloquent in silence, we need to reflect this as best we can. When we achieve a true listening mind, we are joined to the most glorious listener of all.
- In the fifth century, the church leader named Augustine taught that while silence was important during these times of disciplined listening, the most vital lesson to be gained was *balance*. We learn to balance the tension and pressures of life with the calm of dwelling in God’s presence. And through this, we gain the ability to see our worldly issues through God’s perspective.
- Seven hundred years later, Thomas Aquinas wrote that the discipline of listening forms a vital component to devotion, because it grants us an intimate connection to the Holy Spirit. God’s gift to mankind becomes illuminated by our quest for a silent moment. Human reason is elevated to join with the view of heaven.
- In the tenth century, a leader of the British church named Anselm wrote this prayer to guide those seeking a stronger discipline of attentiveness:

“O Lord our God, teach our hearts this day where and when and how to hear you. You have made us, and remade us through Christ’s love. You have bestowed on us all the good things we possess, and still we do not know you well enough. We seek to do that for which we were made. Teach us to seek you, for we cannot seek you unless you teach us, or find you unless you show yourself to us. Let us seek you in our desire, let us desire you in our seeking. Let us find you by loving you, let us love you when we find you. Amen.”

- Here in our silent moment we are truly joining with the family of God. Not a single church, not even a single culture. Reaching beyond our comfort zones, beyond our carefully defined boundaries, into the far reaches of God's kingdom. And there, in this challenging space, we may indeed find ourselves.

LESSON TWENTY-EIGHT

“This, then, is how you ought to regard us: as servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the mysteries God has revealed.”

1 Corinthians 4:1

As we practice this discipline of listening, we often discover a growing desire to move closer to God. This isn't just about hearing his voice; it is about dwelling in his presence.

We develop a discipline of listening in order to be receptive to God. In so doing, we learn what it means to be still and know his glory on an entirely different level—that of direct experience.

- We can also use exercises that will help us accomplish this. Let's go back to using images from the Scriptures. This does not need to be an entire verse. It can be applied to just one word.
- Take for example the attributes the Bible assigns to our Lord. These include Creator, King, Law-giver, Judge, Master, the Almighty, the Great I-Am, and simply, Abba, or Father.
- In this exercise, we should dwell for one week on any of these. Look at the word from the standpoint of how we relate to God: for example, if we see him as Father, we are his children. What images does this bring forth? Alternately, we can see him as the Creator of all good things. We are his creation. We are designed for a purpose.
- Listen to him now, and see what that purpose might be.

LESSON TWENTY-NINE

“ . . . that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the width and length and depth and height; to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge; that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.”

Ephesians 3:17–19

As we learn to listen on a spiritual level, as we seek God’s presence in these quiet moments, we may find ourselves returning time and again to the concept of divine love.

One lesson springs out repeatedly over the two thousand year heritage of the church’s teachings on attentiveness: if we are successful, we will be rewarded with a better understanding of divine love.

- The ancients tell us that God will communicate most readily through love, because that is the one lesson that can only be learned through experience.
- Love expressed in words alone is incomplete. No matter how great the poetry, no matter how powerful the author, love can only be known through loving.
- What is more, love can only be shared when it already exists within us. We can only give what we already have. Thus, if we are successful in seeing God’s vision of divine love more clearly, we become far brighter beacons to the outside world.
- Earlier we spoke about using Bible verses as a basis for our quiet time. Here is an ideal point to apply this practice.
- Perhaps you should consider spending a week dwelling on the 22nd chapter of Matthew, verse 37: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.”
- Another verse that carries great power is found in 1 John, chapter 4, verse 8t: “Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.”

LESSON THIRTY

“ . . . while we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal.”

2 Corinthians 4:18 (NKJV)

Two elements drive our heart's yearning for a more intimate contact with the divine. Beyond our immediate need or concern or weakness, these two rise up like beacons on the horizon. The first is a hunger for the peace that only God's presence can bring us. The second is a purpose great enough to redefine our days.

- A divine purpose requires us to accept a goal, a dream, that is too big for us to accomplish alone. The divine quest is one that defeats us utterly, so long as we seek to accomplish it on our own.
- We often aspire to a higher calling. In many of us, the yearning surfaces every time we have a calm moment, when we are able to step away from the heady rush of daily life.
- But this calling can also frighten us, so much so that often we flee from the yearning, *and* from the quiet moments.
- What may in truth arise here is the recognition that God has *already* called. And that our response was to turn away. And then shame and remorse can make our supposed times of silent attentiveness very turbulent indeed.
- Honesty is vital at such points, as is the reminder to be gentle with yourself. Hold to the discipline. Grow through this experience.
- By asking the question and honestly answering, you can restore the power of quiet listening. Because God's invitation was never intended as a barrier to your drawing near. So ask this question, and answer it honestly.
- If you experience a sense of calling, and yet know that the challenge is too great, your life already too full, your own needs too potent, remember this: In the vast majority of cases, God extends these callings as *invitations*.

- Since the dawn of man, one key component of our spiritual makeup has been God's gift of free will. We are therefore free to respond to God's invitation with the honest and heartfelt response, *Not just yet.*
- At such times, refrain from viewing God's invitation as spurned. When you recall the earlier moment that you turned from, when you hear an invitation now that can't be fit in your earthbound life, see these experiences as seeds planted in your future by a divine hand. God is patient. God is welcoming.
- Make note of your experience. And then write out what you feel would be necessary for you to take up this invitation and act.
- For the time being, set it aside and go back to your world. Continue to practice the discipline of listening. Allow this invitation to bind you closer to your Maker. And give the seed time to grow.

LESSON THIRTY-ONE

“Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you.”

Jonah 3:2

Yesterday we spoke about the invitation to a higher calling that arrives at a point when acceptance is difficult or impossible. Today we will examine the role the discipline of listening can play when the invitation arises, and we want to move forward.

Disciplined attentiveness can help clarify your awareness of a calling, or a spiritual gift. In both cases, it is important to realize that such invitations rarely arrive in anything resembling a perfect state.

- When you rise to this challenge, the discipline of listening will play a vital role in polishing this diamond. In order for this gift or calling to arrive at a state where it is ready for the outside world, we must continue to separate ourselves from the rush of everyday life and listen to God’s continued guidance.
- This carries over into the discipline required to develop your calling. Martin Luther was known to say that the busier he became, the more time he needed to spend with God. Retreating from the world and creating space for the Lord will be an ongoing process.
- As you hone this gift, as you make the sacrifices necessary to bring this to fruition, it is natural to come to see it as yours. Not his. You have done this. You have developed it. You are in control. And to a certain extent, this is true. But only so long as you are able to maintain a humble connection to the giver of all. God wants you to act as co-creator, just as much as he wants you to use this gift to bind yourself more tightly to him.
- Life’s pressures do not disappear with the arrival of a gift. They *amplify*. You have added to your normal life this new aim, one that requires both time and energy. The same pressures you feel drawing you away from your Lord can impact your gift.
- Your discipline of attentiveness, your prayer life, your Scripture reading all become even more vital. See your quiet times as the moments in your day when you return to the source. You maintain a space in which you can separate yourself from all but the eternal. You clarify your thoughts and your aims.
- You grant God time to polish you, just as you polish his gift.

LESSON THIRTY-TWO

“You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

Acts 1:8

We have examined how listening to God might aid us in realizing and refining spiritual gifts. But many of us are primarily interested in simply growing closer to our Lord. Refining this process of disciplined attentiveness directly applies to knowing a closer walk with Jesus. It is important to accept that some of God’s greatest instructions will not come in the form of words. He has spoken to his prophets in whispers soft as breath, and the same is true for us today.

- It is tempting to expect a booming command from the clouds. But these quiet moments encourage us to hear God at far more subtle levels, and to engage all of our senses.
- Within the Bible, God communicates to man through epiphanies, prophetic words, angelic messengers, visions, dreams, answered prayers, miracles, acts of nature, omens, and various signs and wonders. These are still manifested today.
- Most often, however, God speaks to us through the silent breath of his Spirit, or through our daily lives. The discipline of listening helps us become more attuned to these subtle elements. Over time they can become wondrous portals, drawing us closer to the divine.
- While using these periods to draw closer to God, it is important make note of these subtle events when they arise. Otherwise we run the risk of losing their significance once the emotions fade and we return to the heady rush of normal life.
- The act of journaling itself is another means of clarifying the message. As with the discipline of listening itself, try to anchor your notes with a passage of Scripture. Describe the communication and its potential meaning for your life. Revisit your journal over time, seeking a pattern of divine intention.

LESSON THIRTY-THREE

“Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, rivers of living water will flow from within them.”

John 7:37–38

As we draw closer to God, we should see our periods of listening as a means of growing more receptive. These brief moments can form a safe time to unclench the thought process and be open to possibilities.

To delve further into this concept of “drawing near,” we need to return to a concept we discussed earlier, that of the spiritual disciplines. All of these share two traits: They help us draw closer to God, and they aim to fashion a life where service to Christ is the central theme.

In the act of hearing God more clearly, these early practitioners were instructed in the need to know God’s presence, no matter how silent the moment might be, or how subtle the communication. This was known as the art of discernment.

An attitude of openness holds many benefits in drawing closer to our Father. The discipline of listening gradually reveals a new way of understanding patience. Waiting in silence, being attentive, setting aside your personal agenda—these will gradually form expansive moments with God. You find your accepting insights without filtering them through the emotions and demands that frame your days.

- Such openness signifies a very special form of invitation to God. Your quiet time provides a daily opportunity for God to enter your life on a more intimate basis than ever before. Your silent moments are in truth a divine request, asking our Lord to reveal himself, and to make clear his purpose for your life.
- This disciplined openness also frees you from expectations. These moments form a remarkable opportunity for God to express *his* will in *his* way. As you deepen your awareness in these times of attentiveness, be ready to acknowledge the divine surprises that may unfold.
- These quiet moments also prepare you to accept the divine challenge. Though you may not come seeking this, God may still decide you are ready. The Bible holds many examples of seemingly unqualified individuals being called to take on daunting tasks. The attitude of openness will help you summon the courage to answer “Here am I, send me!” to such divine opportunities.

LESSON THIRTY-FOUR

“You keep your covenant with your people and show them your love when they live in wholehearted obedience to you.”

1 Kings 8:23 (GNT)

One of the questions we each have as we strive to listen to God—or indeed whenever others claim that they have received “God’s word”—relates to authenticity. How can we be sure we are hearing a genuine message?

- The truth is, we probably cannot have genuine certainty this side of heaven. Given the selfish aspects of human nature, there is a temptation to serve our own desires by claiming divine guidance. What is more, such matters are often met with skepticism within a worldview that demands scientific evidence.
- However, we can turn to an important tool for testing purported guidance from God. Here are just four ways we can exercise discernment:
 1. Study Scripture. The Bible is filled with information, instruction, and inspiration. How does God reveal himself to man? Is my message consistent with biblical principles?
 2. Gain wisdom. Read some of the important works on knowing and doing the will of God. Examine turning points in the lives of great Christians through history.
 3. Await reinforcement. Be attentive for other indications of the truth of the message, whether from your spiritual practices or your everyday life.
 4. Seek counsel. Ask a trusted pastor or spiritual mentor with experience in such matters. Centuries ago, when the spiritual disciplines were first developed, an important element to this practice was the need to identify a trusted elder. Their hearts are often more still, their compassion greater, their prayers more powerful; and their ability to listen can form a potent mirror to your experiences. Let them help you reach a better clarity to all these experiences.

LESSON THIRTY-FIVE

“He guards them all the day long, and he dwells in their midst.”

Deuteronomy 33:12 (GNT)

Over the course of these lessons, your understanding of silence has most likely undergone a remarkable change. At first, the very idea of stilling the mind, even for a moment, probably seemed impossible. But now there is a real shift-taking place for many. The quiet moments have become an opportunity to draw closer to God in a unique manner.

As they develop the discipline of listening, many people discover these silent moments generate a keener yearning to draw closer to God.

It is here, reflecting upon your newly defined silence, that the contrast with the outer modern world is drawn into sharpest relief.

- Concentration does seem to be in short supply today. Not only are we distracted and constantly multitasking, we are proud of it. It is not just the external activities of our over-scheduled lives, it is the incessant buzzing of our thoughts and worries and desires. But listening to God requires the opposite. It requires *focus*.
- The familiar Bible passage comes to mind: “Be still, and know that I am God.” Here is the invitation to turn from the world’s driving demands and experience what stillness feels like.
- Actively seeking more stillness and silence, even a modest measure, even a few moments each day, will help us focus on God and his whispered intention for our lives.
- The covenant of God is his beautiful and eternal promise to draw near when we seek to do the same. The discipline of patience has at its heart the commitment to do precisely that.
- The practice of listening, in effect, turns us toward heaven. You set aside impediments placed upon you by life in this world, and seek to enter into communion with the next.
- To live in wholehearted obedience is a process of refining. Day by day, you strive to set aside everything that forms a barrier between you and your Maker. The hunger that fills your heart is a response to the Lord’s silent call, the soft invitation to draw near and know Him better.

LESSON THIRTY-SIX

“Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand.”

Romans 5:1–2

As the discipline of listening takes hold, as our yearning to draw near grows stronger, now is a good time to refocus upon the gift of God’s son, our Lord Jesus. Here is God himself incarnate, coming into our world and dwelling within it as a man. What a powerful expression of God’s desire to reveal himself to us. What a glorious opportunity we have to experience the gift of salvation anew.

- Jesus is the Savior and Redeemer, the Alpha and Omega. How do you respond to Jesus’ humanity and his divinity?
- The Gospel descriptions of Jesus are particularly rich in symbolism and imagery: light, way, door, lamb, bread of life, shepherd, rock, vine, morning star. When seeking guidance, reflecting on such images and how they present themselves in our own lives can prove fruitful.
- And now we arrive at the most powerful symbol of all, the image that has remained at the heart of two thousand years of attentiveness: the cross. There are any number of ways to consider this in our quiet times, and each of them carries life-changing significance. Here are just two examples.

1. First, there is the way Jesus himself referred to this cross in his earthly ministry: “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me” (Luke 9:23). Bearing the cross is integral to any understanding of divine will, integral to any commitment of discipleship. As a result, forming your opening prayer around this, or fashioning an image upon this, can carry great impact.

2. Second, there is the opportunity to become more mindful of Christ’s sacrifice. For two thousand years, penitents have imagined themselves gathered at the foot of the cross, bearing the burden of being just another sinner in need of Christ’s holy offering. The Lamb of God lifted up in our darkest hour, to form for us the eternal bridge.

LESSON THIRTY-SEVEN

“You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you, and you will be my witnesses . . .”

Acts 1:8

From the first moment God’s breath passed over the still waters of a dark and unfinished earth, the Holy Spirit has remained integral to our divine connection and growth. Our relationship with the Holy Spirit is vital to apprehending divine guidance. We often think of the Spirit as the source of that “spark” of inspiration and recognition.

- Again, the biblical descriptions of the Holy Spirit can enrich our search. He is called comforter, helper, teacher, advocate, and breath of God.
- Scripture is filled with references to “the Spirit of . . .” This phrase is completed with words like truth, glory, grace, counsel, wisdom, power, life.
- Another extraordinary aspect of the Holy Spirit relates to the imparting of spiritual gifts, which are intended for the common good. These can include wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, miraculous powers, and prophecy.
- Reflecting on one of these aspects, whichever calls most strongly to you, can become a potent means of drawing near to this third person of the Holy Trinity. Remember, it is important that whichever aspect you select remain the focus of your exercises for a minimum of one week.
- One remarkable result of these exercises, dwelling on aspects of the Holy Spirit, is found in heightened compassion. You will enhance your ability to comfort and assist those who are hurting.
- Whenever you reach out to someone in need, or in pain, or in distress, the physical act alone is incomplete. Remember the earlier lesson about giving from what you yourself have gained: Experiencing the breath of God, the intense joy of divine love, the closeness of the Spirit, presents you with an opportunity to respond to another’s need *through this indwelling gift*.

LESSON THIRTY-EIGHT

“This, then, is how you ought to regard us: as servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the mysteries God has revealed.”

1 Corinthians 4:1

Here in our periods of disciplined listening we can indeed find the solace and healing comfort that can only arrive through experiencing God’s love. As we become more comfortable with silence, as our minds become still for those brief moments, some as short as a single breath, we find God awaits us to bestow on us this blessing. The knowledge that he loves us, so fervently and eternally that he has granted us the portal that will never close, the open door through which we might walk, and join him in his kingdom.

- In ancient times, reflecting on the love of God and the sacrifice of Jesus Christ was considered the most crucial component of the discipline of listening. These components were referred to as, the “Mysteries.”. By this, the church elders meant that our true understanding comes when God takes the initiative and reveals truth. Through understanding these two elements— divine love and our Lord’s sacrifice—we enter into a deeper relationship with God.

- For those who desire to draw from the wellspring of divine love, consider focusing your quiet times on a Scripture that holds a unique aspect of God’s love that calls to you. Here are three specific examples.

1. The first relates to love as the very essence and knowledge of God: “Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love” (1 John 4:8).

2. Next is a verse about how we are to love God. Jesus tells us this is the first and the greatest commandment: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind” (Matthew 22:37).

3. Finally, the continuation of this passage – known as “the law of love,” provides a precept for all our actions: “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:39).

- The Scriptures are filled with passages related to the command to love, and the invitation to draw near to God *through* love. Find a verse that speaks to your heart and focus upon this for a minimum of one week.

LESSON THIRTY-NINE

“What, then, shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?”

Romans 8:31–32

As servants of Christ, we have been entrusted with the mystery of God. He asks that as we communicate the gospel, we permit the Holy Spirit to use our words and actions and bring others closer to God. Through our willingness to serve our Maker, the mystery of Christ in us will be revealed.

As we are conformed to his image, we discover a new worth to our days. The nearer we draw to God, the more clearly we see our value through His eyes. This journey of faith, and our relationship with the eternal, is strengthened by the discipline of listening. As you continue this exercise in the coming days and weeks, may you share in the legacy of believers over the past two thousand years: The more we experience God’s love and sacrifice, the better able we are able to serve others.

- To understand love through God’s sacrifice means we are brought face to face with the true meaning of commitment. As God reveals his eternal commitment to each and every believer, we become ever more certain that God will always defend us, always look out for us, and always provide all that we need. Through his grace, he gives us all we need for the journey of faith.
- The more clearly we experience the extravagant, all-embracing, sacrificial and total love of God, the more we are able to heed his call, whatever that might be, wherever it might lead us. For we know that God’s call is rooted in this same unquenchable urge to love us fully. His intention is for us to carry this love out to a world in desperate need.
- If there were ever a true aim for these exercises, if you ever wished to write out a deeper purpose for your times of disciplined listening, think about this: God’s greatest desire is to return us to where we belong. With him. In the garden. For all eternity.

LESSON FORTY

“May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word.”

2 Thessalonians 2:16–17

We are set upon a lifelong journey of seeking and doing God’s will. Again and again, we must turn to him so that he can tell us which way we should turn. It is a journey of mystery, with twists of triumph and despair. Through it all, we rest assured in Christ’s salvation.

Following the will of God does not just take us to the end of our earthly days. It is very the means through which we enter eternal life. There could be no more powerful an invitation—the assurance of divine presence and the promise of divine destiny.

In our final lesson, let us examine several key aspects of the discipline of listening and how they relate to our salvation and our eternal calling.

1. First, the discipline of listening should not be seen as either difficult or a sacrifice. Instead, it should be embraced as an act of joy.

2. Second, this need not take great amounts of time. It can, when such time is available. But God in his infinite power can adapt himself to your life. For the small effort you make, he will cross the infinite divide and reveal himself in glory.

3. Third, listening to God is a reward in and of itself. God’s boundless love and peace surround us at all times. By applying the discipline of patience to the small moments when we can step back from life’s demands, we grow in our ability to appreciate the quiet gift of eternal wisdom.

4. Fourth, God is quiet for a reason. He has given us the power of free will. We are granted the ability to choose our direction in every hour, every minute of our lives here on earth. To speak loudly, to reveal his power in full majesty, would rob us of this gift. So we must *choose* to hear him. We must *choose* to listen. And if we seek him, he will be found by us.

5. Fifth, God does not often speak in words. Just as Jesus taught through parable, so too does God use his creation, our circumstances, and the silent wind of His Spirit to *reveal*.

- So here is the final question, the goal toward which we have been aimed since birth: What does God say to you?