

Silence:

What We May Hear in the Midst of Silence



God once called my cell phone at 4:30 in the morning.

Actually, it wasn't God on the other end of the line. If it had been, and if God had caller ID, then prayer would have become a whole lot easier. But it was simply a mere human from a credit card company calling to verify some information. She must have been the conscientious type, quickly getting to one of the first items on her to-do list on the East Coast while I lazily slept in my bed three hours behind on the West Coast. And I must have sounded incredibly rude to her as I mumbled my way through my answers to her questions.

This particular morning coincided with my successes in flossing, and as I mentioned, I was turning my attention to the more important matters of the Spirit. I was on the lookout for a spiritual problem to be fixed by my little green sticky notes, so I had a moment of pause to wonder if God was trying to get a message to me.

I tend to think God is always arranging events in my life for specific purposes. This is probably an indication of either wisdom or paranoia. If I miss a plane for some reason, I assume He must want me on the next one

to talk to someone about the gospel or encourage him in some way. Or if it's raining when I had planned to go surfing, He must want me to do something else with my morning.

So there I stood in my moment of pause, bare feet chilling on a cold hardwood floor, asking myself, *Why did I get this call on this morning?*

Before long, the memory of the previous night came to me, and I remembered the conversation I had wrapped up with my brother, Scott, just before I fell asleep. We talked about a lot of meaningless things, but one of the more useful topics we discussed was prayer. I told Scott about how little I prayed and how ineffective I seemed to be. I shared with him that I had always wanted to find a place of solitude to pray but had never actually done it. By the end of the conversation, we had talked about not just praying with a list and not simply telling God everything that was on our hearts, and we discussed the need for giving God ample time to reply.

In other words, we talked about praying by listening.

Here was my chance to transition my habit forming successes into the spiritual arena and to do exactly what I had confessed to Scott I had not been doing. Summoning my resolve and shaking my limbs in an attempt to wake up, I entered my walk-in closet with the hard and ugly vinyl floor, shut the door, got on my knees before a wicker laundry hamper, rested my elbows on top of a pillow, respectfully bowed my head, and proceeded to embarrass myself completely before God.

I fought off sleep the entire time, waking from an unfinished prayer several different times. I changed positions from kneeling to sitting to kneeling again because I thought sitting wasn't respectful enough. I tried talking to God quietly in my head, but my mind wandered off in many directions. I attempted to talk out loud, but I felt silly. I struggled with all my might to clear my mind and focus only on God, but I just couldn't stay engaged.

I admit I didn't even come close to my goal. As I kneeled in my closet, I questioned whether God had called me into that prayer closet in the first place and soon began to think He might be calling me back into my warm bed, and I was all too willing to follow that leading. As I stood to exit my closet, I guessed I had been in there for about 15 minutes, feeling a little guilty that this was all I could muster for God. Opening the door into my bedroom, I sheepishly shuffled back to my bed and glanced at the clock on my bedside table. Almost an hour had passed, although I suppose a good 40 minutes of it was spent in and out of sleep.

I took great comfort in the fact that I had prayed for an entire hour, although, as I mentioned, most of it probably didn't count. But it was longer than I had ever prayed before. Still, I can't say it was an enlightening time with God; in fact, I don't remember anything from that morning's prayer. All I remember is that I had to fight to be still, be awake, and listen.

Praying by listening soon became a challenge I wanted to accept. On some days I tried to do it; on others, I didn't. But I knew I could ultimately make this a regular discipline. To address my problems, I created a new sticky note and put those 21 numbers on it again, and I stuck that little green sticky note on the bookshelf in my closet. I recognized that a little discipline and accountability would help my situation, and I expected to become the man of prayer I longed to be.

The sticky note definitely made a difference: I made it three days in a row. Half of the time in my closet was spent fighting off sleep, and the other half was devoted to containing my rambling thoughts.

God, You are so amazing and majestic. The heavens declare Your glory, and there's nothing quite like a sunset to show off Your artistry. I love to watch the sun setting over the ocean, God. You know, I love the ocean. In fact, my favorite place to be is sitting on a surfboard in the water at El Porto, gazing over the mountains behind Malibu. Actually, that view is

always ruined by the smokestacks at the oil refinery. Who would put a refinery on the beach? I wonder how they actually make gasoline? You know, it cost me \$60 the other day to fill up my truck. Why are gas prices so high right now?

I shook it off.

God, I'm sorry I wandered off there. Thank You for Your mercy and for always being there for me. You are such a loving Father, and You are always so incredibly patient with me, even when I'm off doing my own thing or I'm stuck in a rut. You know, Anna was in a bad mood the other night; I said what I said to her to try and help, but it only made things worse. I don't think she was actually listening to me at all, and it was really hard to be patient with her. But I was. I'm a pretty patient guy; no, I'm a really patient guy. Don't You agree, God?

Despite three successive days of deeply spiritual prayers like these, I missed the fourth day and had to start over with a new green sticky note. The next round of attempts lasted for two days. At that point, I knew something was definitely wrong with my approach, but I decided that the problem wasn't me. The problem was simply that I was relying on a green sticky note to help instead of just being disciplined enough to pray every morning. I had a revelation: The easy solution was to continue the habit-forming process but without the green sticky note. Subsequently, the situation improved dramatically, and I made it four days in a row.

There was no 21-day victory, no Sunshine Sailor, and no prayer-time equivalent of sparkling clean teeth. Needless to say, my confidence in these little accountability partners was quickly fading, and I realized I had traded the God of the universe for a god of green sticky notes. Worst of all, my attempts to make myself into a person of spiritual habits did little to satisfy my longings for God; in fact, the cravings began to subside as I started feeling worse about myself because I couldn't do something as simple as talk to Him.

As I moved past my failures in habit forming, I turned my attention back to my prayer life, thinking long and hard about my inability to pray, my tendency to fall asleep in prayer, and my failure to spend time listening to God. In search of more guidance, I turned to the Bible rather than Google, and as I read through the Gospels, I noticed something all too familiar in the account of Jesus' night in the garden of Gethsemane.

On that particular night, just before Jesus was betrayed and arrested, He took His disciples into the garden. A heaviness filled the air as the wind stirred gently through the low limbs of the stout olive trees. In this garden, Jesus came face-to-face with the harsh reality of what He was about to endure. He would soon ask God for another way besides the cross, and He would sweat blood in His gut-wrenching anguish. This was the crucial night in the life of Jesus, His dark night of the soul.

As He went farther into the garden, He brought along His three closest disciples, and He told them to keep watch. Before leaving them to be alone, He gathered them together, sorrow filling His eyes and anguish gripping His face. As they grew silent, He agonized with them, saying, "My soul is crushed with grief to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch [stay awake] with me."¹

He then went even deeper into the garden to pray, coming back shortly thereafter to see His disciples fast asleep. He rebuked them, encouraging them to stay awake and pray, saying, "Couldn't you watch with me even one hour? Keep watch and pray, so that you will not give in to temptation. For the spirit is willing, but the body is weak!"

Jesus again left His chagrined disciples and continued to pray, returning to find them asleep once more. After leaving them a third time to pray, He again came back and found them out cold. When He saw this, Jesus, fully resigned to His fate of solitude, told them quite simply, "Go ahead

and sleep. Have your rest. But look—the time has come. The Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners.”

I try to imagine myself as one of His disciples on that pivotal night.



Three years earlier, this rabbi had asked me to quit my job and follow Him. I had heard He was a respected teacher, and He wanted *me* to be one of His disciples, to learn to do what He did. Something came over me—one of those moments when I had to do something or else I wouldn't be able to breathe. There was little time to say goodbye to my father and my friends; this rabbi was on the move, and the spirit of intrigue and adventure was moving my legs in His direction.

So I did it. I left my old life and began to follow Him. Before long, I saw Him turn six 30-gallon pots full of water into wine, and I thought He would be nice to have around at parties.

I heard Him say some remarkable things over the next few years. One day, when we were walking through a field on the Sabbath, we were hungry, so we started plucking off some of the heads of grain, which technically violated one of our laws about not working on the Sabbath. When the Pharisees confronted our teacher, He told them, “The Son of Man is Lord, even over the Sabbath!”² You should have seen their faces when He said that; it was pretty funny.

Another time, He told a synagogue full of people that they had to eat His flesh and drink His blood in order to have eternal life.³ That one confused even us. But His most controversial claim came when we were in Jerusalem for one of the large feasts. We were walking with Jesus through the temple when the Jewish leaders started to pepper Him with questions. He began



answering them by talking about His Father, and then He dropped a bomb on them by saying, "The Father and I are one."⁴ These guys went into an uproar, even picking up rocks to stone Him for making Himself equal to God. We were terrified, but Jesus talked His way out of the situation, and we got out of town.

If His astonishing words weren't enough, I also saw Him perform some mind-blowing miracles. This carpenter-turned-itinerant-preacher was making blind men see, including a man who had been blind from birth. He put His hand on a leper and healed him, which was wild because most of us hadn't ever been close to a leper, much less touched one. He also fed 5000 men and their families on one occasion with only five barley loaves and two fish that a young boy gave us. And He capped off that night by walking out to us on the water. Peter even got out of the boat and walked on water too!⁵

These were all amazing miracles, but even more remarkable were the dead people we hung out with. We went to one town where a local ruler approached Jesus and made a completely unreasonable request. He must not have been thinking straight because of his grief. He told Jesus his little girl had died, but if Jesus would come and lay His hand on her, she would live again. I thought maybe Jesus could have healed her illness if we had gotten there sooner, but once people are dead, they are dead. But Jesus followed the man, entered his house, and brought out a living girl. And perhaps to prove it wasn't a fluke, He did the same thing for one of our friends who had been dead for four days.⁶ I had so many questions for Lazarus that night.

My memories are suddenly interrupted by a chilling breeze. I look up into the darkened sky, thinking it is even darker than usual. My mind lingers on that first day, the day I left the only life I had ever known to follow Jesus. I realize how little I had known about Him at the time. The intrigue

drew me in, and a small voice inside me told me to trust this man. But as I followed Him from town to town and watched Him touch the hearts and minds of so many, I slowly began to think He might actually be who He said He was. I actually began to believe I had been traveling with the long-awaited Messiah, prophesied about and eagerly anticipated by our people for hundreds and hundreds of years.

He had been completely selfless in all things, always giving of Himself to those who wanted to be around Him. He had met the needs of others, man after man, woman after woman, child after child, never demanding to have His own needs met. And now, in this moment in the garden, during the cool stillness of night, He seems to be in need. This is my one chance to do something for Him.

And I fall asleep.



Jesus' final response to His disciples during this event is interesting. The first time He came back to them, He seemed a little dismayed, saying, "Couldn't you stay awake...even one hour?" The second time He returned must have been similar. But the third time was different. The third time, resignation was in His voice. He said, "Still asleep?"

I am saddened that He wasn't surprised by their inability to stay awake with Him. He clearly wanted something from them—the comfort of a nearby friend during a hard time, or their watchful eyes looking for the imminent arrival of His betrayer, or simply their listening ears to hear His pleas to His Father so they would identify more strongly with the immensity of His sacrifice. But though He desired something from them, He didn't seem all that surprised when they failed Him.

I wonder if Jesus isn't surprised by my inability to stay awake with Him either. After mulling over these thoughts, I went back into my prayer closet and confessed my inability to listen well and be available to Him. I began talking to Him about these struggles, asking Him about the time His disciples failed Him. I fell back into my routine of praying through ACTS (adoration, confession, thanksgiving, and supplication). I tried to think of nothing, but that only made me think of everything.

One Sunday during this ongoing struggle, I asked my pastor, Zac, if he practiced the habit of silence. He responded that he did. I explained to him that I tried to concentrate my thoughts on God, on His creation, on His qualities, or on nothingness. I told him I had trouble being silent before God, and I wasn't sure if I was doing something wrong or needed to try something else or if I was just destined for an immature prayer life.

Pastor Zac's response to me was quite simple. He said, "I think you're making this too hard. Just go and be silent before God. That's it." Sometimes the most profound truths are hidden in the simplest of answers.

So I began doing just what he told me to do. I did away with the green sticky notes for good, abandoning my quest to be a person of good habits, leaving all my past successes lying in impotence at the door of my closet. I didn't complicate the matter with elaborate plans. I just went to bed a little earlier, and I made sure I prayed at times and in positions that would be conducive to a good conversation with someone. Basically, I stopped trying so hard, and instead, I just sat still before God, open to anything that might happen.

Remembering what God did during those times is delightful. Silence brought a wellspring of thoughts, each stream cascading down the rocky paths of my life and smoothing over the rough edges of my perspectives about life and faith. As I let God direct my thoughts, I found myself dwelling on some issue or relationship or idea and working it over in my mind,

processing and polishing it until I could see what to do next. And I also felt more engaged in my interactions with God, less distracted and more energized by the growth that was occurring.

I don't know that I stumbled onto any sort of spiritual secret. I think I just realized that prayer was meant to be a conversation, and I had spent all of my prayer life talking to God without ever taking the time to listen. In fact, I had talked so much that I often bored myself to sleep.

I had longed for intimacy with God for much of my life, but connecting with an inaudible and invisible Father was just so hard, particularly when I felt like a fool for talking into thin air in my darkened closet or for chasing thoughts all over creation in my head. The disciples must have had the same experience in the garden that night. After all, they didn't fall asleep when Jesus was talking to them face-to-face. They only fell asleep when He wasn't there, when they were left to engage their invisible God in prayer.

Their struggle and my struggle aren't just about falling asleep or being distracted during prayer, and they aren't about our inability to be silent. Most of our times of prayer are actually in quiet places because we often pray to God in our heads. So our issue in prayer is that we don't engage in an adequate conversation. We tend to talk at God rather than talk with Him.

So as I crave more of God, I want to have a meaningful dialogue with my heavenly Father, to enjoy more intimacy with Him than I've ever had before. And the only way I can have this kind of relationship is to keep my mouth shut at times, which is much harder than it may seem.

King David might have been thinking of this truth when he said, "*Be still* in the presence of the LORD, and wait patiently for Him to act." We see the command elsewhere in Psalms: "*Be still, and know that I am God.*"⁷ David knew of the tremendous power in stillness, the forcefulness of perspective that overwhelms the mind and spirit with thoughts outside of

itself. The roar of mental activity soon slows to a gentle murmur, and the mind's eye opens to a wider viewpoint that makes self-centered concerns seem unimportant.

I think this is why God spoke to His people in the midst of silence. Elijah heard the Lord in a gentle whisper. Samuel heard the voice of God calling to him in the stillness of sleep.⁸ And Jesus would often retire to the hills alone, to be with God in the tranquility of night.

So silence makes room for God to speak, and it also makes for better conversation. After all, I can think of far more to say to someone who is talking back. And this kind of dialogue helps me cover more meaningful ground with God. The typical empty praise, where I try to think of big words I have heard in a hymn or someone else's prayer, no longer seems worthwhile. In a two-way conversation, I can get more real and talk about the sin I've been hiding and haven't wanted to deal with. And I naturally want to thank God for giving me as much as He has, including the gift of conversation with Him.

Sometimes I make time for conversations like these with God, and sometimes He speaks to me in the silence. At other times, He's silent in the silence. And sometimes I ignore Him altogether, never seeking Him out to talk. I still wish God would call me on my cell phone, and engaging with Him would still be easier if I could audibly hear His voice. But until I meet Him face-to-face, I can always kneel before my wicker laundry hamper, opening my eyes to the darkness and my ears to the silence from which God often speaks.

Because only in silence can I hear my Father's voice.