

Getting Back on Spiritual Track #4 - Holy Listening

Our love for others is learning to listen to them. Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Did you know that research has shown why men and women have a tough time communicating with each other? It's because men listen with only one side of their brains, while women listen with both sides of their brains, and all the women say Amen!

So, to get back on track and stay on track you've got to be able to listen when God speaks. That's one of the big ideas in the Old Testament books of I and II Kings, which is what we're traveling through in this series. God speaks through his Prophets. Prophets were God's voice, his spokesperson. God used prophets to send his message to his people. It wasn't the only way God communicated, but in this particular period of time, it was his primary way. Through prophets like Elijah, Elisha, and Isaiah. God would speak to these men, and they would, in turn, make God's word known.

However, there was a problem. The kings, and often the people, did not want to hear what the prophets had to say. Let's look at a case study on this – it's from the 22nd chapter of I Kings. Here's the background. The king of Israel wanted to go to war against the Arameans over some territory that the Arameans had taken from him. He knew he wasn't able to do this alone. So, he got the king of Judah to help him.

Let's pick up what happened from there. For three years there was no war between Aram and Israel. ²**But in the third year Jehoshaphat king of Judah went down to see the king of Israel.** ³**The king of Israel had said to his officials, "Don't you know that Ramoth Gilead belongs to us and yet we are doing nothing to retake it from the king of Aram?"** ⁴**So he asked Jehoshaphat, "Will you go with me to fight against Ramoth Gilead?" Jehoshaphat replied to the king of Israel, "I am as you are, my people as your people, my horses as your horses."** ⁵**But Jehoshaphat also said to the king of Israel, "First seek the counsel of the LORD."** I Kings 22:1-5.

A good start. Jehoshaphat wants to find out what God might have to say about things before going to war. He knew not just to listen to counsel in general, or write a list of strengths and weaknesses, benefits and costs. The question is what is God saying at this time? Let's read on.

⁶**So the king of Israel brought together the prophets — about four hundred men — and asked them, "Shall I go to war against Ramoth Gilead, or shall I refrain?" "Go," they answered, "for the Lord will give it into the king's hand."** ⁷**But Jehoshaphat asked, "Is there not a prophet of the LORD here whom we can inquire of?"** I Kings 22:6-7.

At first this sounds a little weird and quite a bit over the top. They called together four hundred so-called prophets. Now some background here is crucial. During that time, there were real prophets, and there were false prophets. Some prophets were truly men of God that God spoke through, and there were self-proclaimed prophets who never listened to God and certainly God did not speak through.

So, there were authentic prophets and other prophets who basically were self-serving. These so-called prophets would say whatever they thought the kings and people would like to hear.

They knew the king wanted to go to war and they knew the king would want to hear that he would have victory. Easy right. Just tell the King what he wants to hear.

However, unlike the king of Israel, Jehoshaphat, the King of Judah was a little sharper than that. He knew the difference between a real prophet and a false prophet. So, he said, “Okay, we’ve heard from these guys – isn’t there a real prophet around? One who is really serving and hearing from God? One who is going to tell us what God really has to say?” These guys say they are prophets but what about a prophet from God?

The response of the King of Israel is interesting. Let’s take a look: **⁸The king of Israel answered Jehoshaphat, “There is still one man through whom we can inquire of the LORD, but I hate him because he never prophesies anything good about me, but always bad. He is Micaiah [pronounced: Meh-ki-yah] son of Imlah.” “The king should not say that,” Jehoshaphat replied. ⁹So the king of Israel called one of his officials and said, “Bring Micaiah son of Imlah at once.” I Kings 22:8-9.**

The king knew he could draw from a Godly prophet. Unfortunately, there was a problem. He didn’t want to hear what he had to say. In the past what Micaiah had to say to the king in the past wasn’t good. It took real courage to do this. Let’s find out what happened next:

¹³The messenger who had gone to summon Micaiah said to him, “Look, as one man the other prophets are predicting success for the king. Let your word agree with theirs, and speak favourably.” ¹⁴But Micaiah said, “As surely as the LORD lives, I can tell him only what the LORD tells me.” ¹⁵When he arrived, the king asked him, “Micaiah, shall we go to war against Ramoth Gilead, or shall I refrain?” ... ¹⁷Then Micaiah answered, “I saw all Israel scattered on the hills like sheep without a shepherd, and the LORD said, ‘These people have no master. Let each one go home in peace.’ ” ¹⁸The king of Israel said to Jehoshaphat, “Didn’t I tell you that he never prophesies anything good about me, but only bad?” ¹⁹Micaiah continued, “...The LORD has decreed disaster for you.”... I Kings 22:13-19.

Wow! What a word from God. Not what was expected. That took real courage to bring a word like that. Right against and totally opposite to all the other words that said the King will have success. If you go to war, it will be disaster. God’s word was straight up. You will lose and face destruction. So, what did the king do? He ignored it. He did not listen. That’s not all – he reacted with real hostility towards the prophet. He tried to destroy the messenger as a way of destroying the message.

That’s what happened here. **²⁶The king of Israel then ordered, “Put this fellow in prison and give him nothing but bread and water until I return safely.” ... I Kings 22:26.** So, the King decided not to follow the prophets’ words and go against God. I will be in control of my own destiny and not listen. I will prove you wrong. So, he decided he would go to war, but hide his identity, so that he wouldn’t be killed or face the destruction Micaiah had told him what he would face if he went forward. So, he decided he would disguise himself.

²⁹So the king of Israel and Jehoshaphat king of Judah went up to Ramoth Gilead. ³⁰ The king of Israel said to Jehoshaphat, “I will enter the battle in disguise, but you wear your royal robes.” So the king of Israel disguised himself and went into battle. ³¹Now the king of Aram

had ordered his thirty-two chariot commanders, “Do not fight with anyone, small or great, except the king of Israel.”³² When the chariot commanders saw Jehoshaphat, they thought, “Surely this is the king of Israel.” So they turned to attack him, but when Jehoshaphat cried out,³³ the chariot commanders saw that he was not the king of Israel and stopped pursuing him.³⁴ But someone drew his bow at random and hit the king of Israel between the sections of his armour. The king told his chariot driver, “Wheel around and get me out of the fighting. I’ve been wounded.”³⁵ All day long the battle raged, and the king was propped up in his chariot facing the Arameans. The blood from his wound ran onto the floor of the chariot, and that evening he died.³⁶ As the sun was setting, a cry spread through the army: “Every man to his town; everyone to his land!”³⁷ So the king died and was brought to Samaria, and they buried him there...³⁸ as the word of the LORD had declared. I Kings 22:29-38.

He didn’t listen and it cost him not just his spiritual life but his earthly one as well. Now, you don’t have to be a belligerent King to have problems hearing God. We can all have problems hearing God. It’s not that he isn’t communicating with us, it’s just that either we are not listening or we don’t want to hear what he is saying.

Congregational consultant and seminary professor Craig Satterlee uses the term “Holy Listening” to describe the kind of listening we do when we seek to discern, the presence and activity of God in our lives. It’s Holy because we are hoping to encounter God when we take time to listen. He believes that Holy listening is indispensable because it builds intimacy in us and in the church.

Our listening can be imperfect because we are flawed people with our own agendas but we can learn to listen. Craig Satterlee notes, “**Holy listening demands vigilance, alertness, openness to others and the expectation that God will speak through them. Holy listening trusts that the Holy Spirit acts in and through our listening. We discern and discover the wisdom and will of God by listening to one another and to ourselves. From a Christian perspective, Holy listening takes the incarnation seriously; it dares to believe that as God was enfleshed in Jesus of Nazareth so God is embodied in other people**”.

It’s worth noting that Jesus was a champion listener. Jesus loving and provocative interactions with people, described in the four Gospels are great models to follow if you want to learn how to listen. A few examples, his interactions with Nicodemus, **John 3:1-8**, Jesus listening to the woman at the well in **John 4: 9-14** and the woman who bled for many years, **Mark 5: 21-43**.

The gift of a listening ear communicates love and grace, qualities found abundantly in Jesus. Careful listening is often the most appropriate way to show love and communicate that God is love.

Proverbs 8:32-34 ³²“Now then, my children, listen to me; blessed are those who keep my ways. ³³Listen to my instruction and be wise; do not disregard it. ³⁴Blessed are those who listen to me, watching daily at my doors, waiting at my doorway.

I love this description of listening as “waiting at my doorway”. I was always considered an impatient kid. So, learning patience has been a life long journey for me. Waiting means slowing down, quieting your spirit, be expectant that God will speak but be prepared to wait.

Of course, one of the ways to hear God is through prayer. It's here that we attempt to discern God's will in particular situations. We want to be in alignment with God. Although God could work without us, he delights to answer the prayers of his children and to be glorified by our thanksgiving when he does.

In prayer, we don't seek to change God's mind. We seek to discern his will and to pray accordingly. We believe that there are some things that God will do in answer to our prayers- which makes them all the more necessary. Prayer is not to manipulate God to achieve a personal desire but to wait at God's doorway without an agenda in the hope that he will answer and lead our lives.

¹⁶Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need. Hebrews 4:16.

I was reminded of God's throne of grace this week. As you know we run the Op Shop Café alongside the Op Shop on a Tuesday every week. A number of our women had been praying for someone who came for quite a while and this week she gave her heart to Jesus.

There have been plenty of studies done on listening. Even some done on Christians listening to God. Here are some reasons that people do not want to listen to God;

1. We're afraid that God will demand something of us that we don't want to do.
2. We're afraid God will send us a long way from our home and family.
3. Sometimes I don't feel worthy or capable of hearing God speak.

Then, sometimes God speaks when you least expect him to. God's grace means he always wants to talk to you. Just as the kings had a choice. We have a choice. We can choose to listen and obey or simply try and find someone or something that will tell us what we want to hear. As in my story, God might choose to surprise you about how and when he speaks. The question is, will you listen?

¹⁹ My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, James 1:19.