

WEEK 5: EXERCISE #1

My heart has heard you say, "Come and talk with me."

And my heart responds, "LORD, I am coming."

—*Psalm 27:8 (NLT)*

Hearing God's voice is a spiritual practice that requires exercise. We learn to hear as we listen to Scripture, the experiences of others (present and past), and our own prayers. Unless we intentionally train our inner or "spiritual" ear to hear, we will too easily let the voice of God pass by totally unnoticed. Or we may think we've heard Him but we receive the message tentatively because we feel ourselves somehow unworthy.

The practice of listening prayerfully to the Spirit's leading is rooted in silence and sacrifice. It is cultivated over time as we allow the Lord to use us in His Kingdom work. Listening happens as we make ourselves quiet and available.

Read 1 Samuel 3:1–18.

Find a quiet place for reading this passage. Be still. Pray, "Lord, give me ears to hear You and a heart to receive all You have for me today." Now, read the Scripture slowly, underlining phrases that repeat or are significant to you.

What are your initial insights? What do you notice about Samuel's encounter with God? What do you notice about how God gets Samuel's attention (note the changes in verses 7 and 21)?

Do you have a personal story of a time when you sensed God's presence and power—even before you were aware of Him in your life?

“He is the LORD; let him do what is good in his eyes” (1 Sam. 3:18). Do you trust God's plan to reveal Himself to His people in His time? Do you trust Him to reveal Himself to your people (your spouse, your children, your coworkers) in His time?

Encounter

Maggie Gobran, a nominee for the 2012 Nobel Peace Prize, works with the poorest of the poor in Cairo, Egypt. “Mama Maggie,” as she's known among the poor, reaches out to children living in garbage dumps, offering the love and hope that come only through Christ. She is a woman of deep prayer who has learned the great value of silence in the quest for the heart of God. Mama Maggie has written, “Silence your body to listen to your words, silence your tongue to listen to your thoughts, silence your thoughts to listen to your heart beating, silence your heart to listen to your spirit, and silence your spirit you listen to His spirit. In silence you leave many and be with The One.”⁴

Let's try a timed listening exercise that brings us to a place of silence and into the company of The One.

In this encounter, you will spend five minutes in silence. Don't try too hard to make something spiritual happen in these minutes. Just listen. Be aware of anything you hear—traffic noise, sounds of children, the on-and-off click of air-conditioning, your heartbeat. Listen to your own thoughts and be aware of the directions they take.

At the end of these moments of listening, record in your journal what you've heard.

Now think about the noise of a usual day. What fills the air around you? Family talks, television, YouTube, music, phone calls? Think through a day and write down as many typical sounds as come to mind.

How might God be speaking to you through these people or things? How are these noises distracting you from the voice of God?

Where in your day could you develop the discipline of silence so you're more able to hear the voice of God? Would you be willing to commit to a ten- or fifteen-day experiment, in which you give at least ten minutes per day to the discipline of listening?

Write a statement of understanding around the notion of silence or listening as a "fertilizer" for spiritual soil.

WEEK 5: EXERCISE #2

Read Philippians 4:14–20.

Paul is writing to the people in Philippi, for whom he has a special affection. Paul was the founder of the Philippian church and spent a considerable amount of time there. When he wrote to them, he wanted to acknowledge their generosity while he was in prison and encourage them in the faith.

Reread this passage and circle or underline all the words and phrases related to giving (i.e., share, giving, receiving, fragrant offering, etc.). Now, make a list in your journal of the words and terms you've circled. Take a few minutes to look these words up in a dictionary. How do these definitions inform your understanding of giving? Out of what spirit do the Philippians give? In what spirit is it received? What do you learn here about joy?

Generosity and passion are marks of one who has had a genuine encounter with Christ. We are called to give generously of ourselves—time, talent, gifts, prayers, and witness. We are called, out of our deep love for Jesus, to go and spread the seeds of this good news of redemption. And we are challenged to trust God with our needs. Our giving in every way is a fragrant offering to Him.

Encounter

Review the parable of the four soils in Luke 8:4–21.

In your journal, make a grid of four boxes. Label the first box on the top left-hand corner “hard soil.” Label the box next to it on the top right

“rocky soil.” Label the bottom left-hand corner box “thorny soil,” and label the bottom right-hand box “good soil.”

Now, consider all the things that make up your life—family, job, friendships, associations, hobbies, habits. Think, too, about how you spend your time, talents, money, and personal influence. Using the four boxes you’ve just made, how would you categorize each of these things in your life? Build a list in each box.

As we said earlier, we are all a mixed bag of “sanctified” and “getting there.” Some areas of our life bear more spiritual fruit than others. Think of these four boxes you’ve just made as a map of your spiritual life. Turn them into a prayer journey, taking time with each list for praise, intercession, and confession.

Remember: Life is a journey. None of us has yet arrived. All of us are sowing the seeds, plowing in the seeds, pulling the weeds, and mining the rocks. Staying true to the process is the key to growing roots and bearing fruit.

Read Philippians 1:3–6 as you close your prayer time. Give thanks to God for those who have made an impact on your life and have helped you to grow.

WEEK 5: EXERCISE #3

Read Romans 12:1.

Let's shift for a moment to this brief verse in Romans. Paul urges his audience here to give everything, even their bodies, to God in response to His mercy. In this verse, we can hear echoes of many healing stories—the stories of Joanna and Mary Magdalene among them, who gave themselves to the work and wonder of following Jesus in response to the healing and mercy they received from Him.

“Make yourselves a living sacrifice.” This is what it means to abandon our lives to Christ. It means following Jesus. It means giving up our own place for the sake of His journey. On this road, we find our value in the ways we sacrifice our time, effort, and comforts for the sake of building something eternal. Such sacrifice changes the very texture of the soil of our hearts.

2 Corinthians 12:15 says, “I will very gladly spend for you everything I have and expend myself as well.” This is the attitude of one who follows Jesus.

The hard part of sacrifice is that it changes us, and no one really likes change. But the wonderful part of sacrifice is that . . . it changes us! We begin to take on more and more of the character of Christ. We take on His interests as we shed our own. We learn to love like He loves. We begin to see the world around us as Jesus sees it. It is a glorious transformation.

Reflect on the phrase “living sacrifice.” For a community of faith used to making animal sacrifices, how would this term have been received? What do you think it might have meant, in a first-century context?

Do you know someone who you'd say has given themselves as a “living sacrifice”?

Read 2 Corinthians 12:15; 1 Samuel 7:1–12.

Highlight or underline all the words in these two passages that describe the attitude of a follower of Jesus. What does this list teach you about yourself and your own walk with Jesus?

What changes do you need to commit to, so you can move forward?

Maybe this is the key question for all of us who truly want transformation: Why is change so *hard*?

Janet Hagberg has written on the stages of faith.⁵ With each stage, we grow in our understanding of God and ourselves, but along the way we will face the temptation to stop moving forward. Why? Because no one really likes change. Yet, it is as we press in to Jesus, as we allow transformation to happen, that we discover our heart's deepest desires.

Encountering Jesus is really about discovering who we are.

Read 1 Samuel 7:1–12.

An Old Testament practice teaches us how to stop and acknowledge those times when we have encountered God, experienced His provision, and moved forward. Often, when the people of God were journeying toward their destiny, they would encounter the Lord and mark the occasion and place with a rock or pile of rocks.

When Samuel and his people faced a great army of Philistines, Samuel took a stone and set it up in the place of that battle and he named it Ebenezer, for he said, “Thus far, the LORD has helped us” (v. 12).

Encounter

Here, I raise mine Ebenezer, hither by thy help I'm come.

And I hope by thy good pleasure safely to arrive at home.

—from the hymn, “Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing”

written by Robert Robinson, 1735–1790

There are times when it is right to stop and remember God’s real, holy presence. We are here because of God . . . because of His love, His power, His provision, His grace, His goodness.

Begin by going outside to collect a few rocks. Next, make a list in your journal of your own “Ebenezers.” What spiritual markers can you note—events, healing moments, or times of provision to which you can point, saying, “Thus far, the Lord has been good to me”? How did your spiritual life mature through these events?

Now, with your rocks in your hand, begin reflecting with God on your spiritual journey. For each significant event noted, drop one of your rocks into a bowl or make a pile in the center of your desk or table. Each time you place a rock in the pile say, “Thus far, the Lord has been good to me.”

End this time of thanksgiving and praise by singing all the verses of “Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing.” You can find it online by typing the title into a search engine.

WEEK 5: EXERCISE #4

Read Luke 8:1–4.

Let's look at the parable of the sower in context. Luke introduces us to Jesus' parable in chapter 8 by sharing His location and who He is traveling with. Who is Jesus traveling with? Underline all the different people mentioned in these verses.

Why do you suppose Luke gets specific about the identity of these women?

What do the Scriptures reveal about these three women? Make a list of what you observe.

At least some of these were the same women who encountered the risen Christ and then delivered that resurrection message to the male disciples. They gave their lives to serving the good news and following Jesus.

Can you imagine what it was like to be among the last to see Jesus on the cross, among the first to see the resurrected Christ, and among the ones charged to “go and tell the others”? The women who were with Jesus had that honor.

Knowing something about their circumstances, how do these women encourage you?

Read Luke 8:4–8.

As crowds begin to gather and grow, Jesus encounters all kinds of people on all kinds of journeys. He knows what is in their hearts, so He begins to teach them how to examine their own lives. Jesus gets it that

some get it and some don't. Some would rather be part of the crowd. Some are hungry for an experience from God.

Jesus begins talking about a farmer who sows some seed. For an audience familiar with farming, this is a funny story. The farmer is tossing seed everywhere! Evidently cost is not an issue. Nor is fruit. The farmer just tosses, with no concern for where the seed might fall.

Normally, a sower in biblical times would have plowed as he sowed, mixing the seed into the ground. Not so this farmer. He simply sowed. And in those days, two kinds of seeds were generally used: wheat and barley. The barley was sown into poorer soil, and the wheat was for more fertile soil. But our farmer in the parable seems to be sowing the same seed on all soil.⁶

List the ways you witness God's grace in this story.

This story says as much about God's grace as it does about us. Our God is eternally hopeful on our behalf, sowing preventively into our lives even before we are spiritually ready. He sows into imperfect soil. And our God is eternally generous, giving His best to all His children without preference. The poor—and the poor in spirit—all receive the same seed. One Lord, one faith, one baptism (Eph. 4:5).

Our part in this process is to examine our "soil." Into what is the Spirit of God being sowed? Are there rocks needing to be removed? Weeds that need to be pulled? What needs to be plowed under, what hard soil needs to be broken up? How do we participate in preparing the soil?

An interesting side note: The Pharisees do not seem to be present for this teaching. The hardest soil is not around! The religious guys have been

so present and pesky, always hovering nearby watching for Jesus to slip up. Because they are not here for this teaching, Jesus is able to focus on those who have ears to hear.

How does this encourage the disciples?

What encouragement does this give you?

Read Luke 8:9–15.

In verse 9 Jesus' disciples ask Him what this parable means. Jesus is clear in His explanation: He is talking about us. These are the realities present in any journey of faith. The seed is the Word of God sown expectantly into every kind of life. Weeds, rocks, and hard soil are the worries of the world and tools of the enemy, all conspiring against us and keeping the Word of God from taking root.

Following Jesus is about cultivating our spiritual soil, uprooting the weeds of worry, and plowing through the barriers to growth. It is about fertilizing our lives with God's plan, provision, protection, and promises so our roots grow deep into Him who is our Head.

Cultivating soil is about choosing to believe and be saved, not on our own strength but on the grace and generosity of the Sower.

What did the disciples have to let go of before they could allow the seed to take root?

What do you need to let go of in order to hold on to what God has for you?

Encounter

In his letter to the Corinthian church, Paul wrote, “I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow” (1 Cor. 3:6). God uses people in the process of sowing the good news about Jesus into the world.

Make a list of people (even if just one name) you believe God is waiting to encounter. Don’t assume you know their spiritual needs or the condition of their “soil.” Instead, sit in God’s presence and with one person at a time in mind, ask Him to show you what their deepest needs are and how you can best serve the process of helping them encounter Jesus. Remember: our job is not to cause growth. Our job is to plant and water!

Journal your insights and what you hear.

WEEK 5: EXERCISE #5

Read Luke 9:1–6.

Here in these verses Jesus gives His disciples marching orders. He sends them out to sow some seeds—to proclaim the coming Kingdom as they healed the sick, cast out demons, and cured diseases. The power they took with them was the power of Jesus. Their resources are what has been sown into them—the words of God that had been planted, watered, and were taking root in their hearts. “Take nothing else,” Jesus said, “except what you’ve been given by Me.”

Why do you suppose Jesus asked them not to take a bag, money, or even an extra shirt with them? How might it have changed their message if they’d taken things with them? How would it have affected their sense of dependence on God? How would it have affected the perceptions of those they went to serve?

Here’s a question: How could the presence of money change the spiritual climate of a mission journey? When well-meaning efforts focus on material needs, do they help or hurt the spiritual conversation? Is Jesus more concerned about the internals or the externals?

Read Luke 11:1–10.

When Jesus sent His disciples out, He charged them with proclaiming the Kingdom of God. Two chapters later, He is teaching them how to pray for the Kingdom of God to invade the earth.

John Smith, an Australian evangelist, in a sermon in 1997, said that when Christ prayed, “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven,” He was offering us a model for intercession on the big scale. He was showing us that whatever is happening in heaven, that’s what we ought to be praying for on earth. Are there wars in heaven? No! Then we ought to be praying for an end to all war on earth. Is there racism in heaven? No! Then we ought to be praying against racism here on earth. Is there anger, or hatred, or unbelief? No! Then we ought to be praying against those things here. When we pray heaven onto earth, we know we’re praying the will of God.

Jesus teaches us to pray for God’s Kingdom to expand. That’s a dangerous prayer. If you mean it when you pray it, then God’s going to use you to expand His territory. In other words if you’re willing, God can employ you in His Kingdom right now.

Do you have neighbors who don’t yet know Christ? Or family members? Or friends or coworkers? If you do, that’s territory God wants. Are you using your prayers strategically in order to claim that territory for God’s Kingdom? “God, may Your Kingdom come soon to my neighbor.” “May your Kingdom come soon to my child, my parent, my brother or sister.” “May your Kingdom come soon to my spouse, my ex-spouse, my coworker.” Your home and your marriage . . . that’s also territory God wants. Are you praying for the Lord to claim that territory for His Kingdom? Are you willing to serve a difficult situation with prayer?

“Lord God, may Your Kingdom come soon into every relationship, every life, every system.”

Encounter

Meditate on this quote from an anonymous believer:

Indeed the very heart of this work is nothing else but a naked intent toward God for God's own sake. I call it a naked intent because it is utterly disinterested. In this work the perfect artisan does not seek personal gain or exemption from suffering. One desires only God and God alone. One is so fascinated by the God one loves and so concerned that God's will be done on earth that one neither notices nor cares about one's own ease or anxiety. In reality it amounts to a yearning for God, a longing to see and taste God as much as is possible in this life.

"Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

—Jesus, Matthew 6:10

Write the above verse at the top of a journal page. Now, ask yourself: what kinds of things can I expect to find in heaven? What Kingdom ideals am I most passionate about? Where has the soil of my heart been enlightened to desire more of the Kingdom of God and less of the world?

Journal on these questions.

How can you begin praying more strategically for God's Kingdom to come on earth and into the lives of people you love?

The old adage is: Pray the provision, not the problem. Jesus' teaching on prayer teaches us to focus on the potential present in any situation or life. "Your Kingdom come."

JESUS

ENCOUNTER

In the last encounter, you were asked to write down the names of a few people God might want to use you in reaching. Pray for them again in this encounter with Jesus, focusing not on their problems but on God's provision.