

Contemplative and Listening Prayer

Being Still Before God — Learning to Hear the Voice That Is Always Speaking

“My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me.”

— **John 10:27 (NIV)**

What Is Contemplative Prayer?

Contemplative prayer is prayer that moves beyond words, petitions, and mental activity into a resting attentiveness to God. It is not the absence of prayer — it is prayer at its most elemental: a turning of the whole self toward God in loving attention, without agenda or performance.

The word “contemplation” comes from the Latin *contemplatio* — to gaze, to observe attentively. In the Christian tradition, contemplative prayer is not passive indifference but active receptivity. Like Mary at the feet of Jesus (Luke 10:39), it is the posture of one who has chosen the “better thing”: to be present to the One who is always present to us.

“**Listening prayer**” is the broader practice of bringing attentiveness to God into every form of prayer — not only in extended silence but in Scripture reading, conversation with a spiritual director, journaling, and daily life. It rests on a conviction: **God still speaks**. The question is whether we are quiet enough to hear.

A Biblical Foundation

Contemplative and listening prayer are not modern inventions or borrowed from Eastern religion. They are woven into the fabric of Scripture from beginning to end.

“Be still, and know that I am God.”

— **Psalms 46:10 (ESV)**

The Hebrew word translated “be still” is *raphah* — to let go, to release, to cease striving. The Psalm does not call for passive emptiness but for the deliberate relinquishment of control so that God can be known. This is the heartbeat of contemplative prayer.

Scripture	What It Shows Us
1 Kings 19:11–12	Elijah encounters God not in wind, earthquake, or fire, but in a “still small voice” — the sound of sheer silence (ESV). God’s most intimate communications often come quietly.
Psalms 131:2	“I have calmed and quieted myself, I am like a weaned child with its mother.” Childlike rest in God is a posture, not an achievement.

Luke 10:38–42	Mary sits at Jesus’ feet, listening. Jesus calls it “the better part.” Attentive presence to God is not laziness — it is wisdom.
Mark 1:35	Jesus rose before dawn, withdrew to a solitary place, and prayed. The Son of God required silence. So do we.
Romans 8:26	“The Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express.” Prayer goes deeper than language. God’s Spirit prays within us.
Revelation 3:20	“Here I am! I stand at the door and knock.” Hearing requires attentiveness. Jesus does not force his way in.

How God Speaks

God is not silent. But his voice is rarely loud, and it is almost never what we expect. Learning to hear God requires learning to recognize the ways He speaks — and the humility to have those recognitions tested by Scripture, community, and a spiritual director.

“Whether you turn to the right or to the left, your ears will hear a voice behind you, saying, “This is the way; walk in it.”

— **Isaiah 30:21 (NIV)**

Common Ways God Speaks

- **Scripture** — the primary and most reliable way God speaks. A verse that will not leave you, a passage that seems written for this moment, a word that arrives with unusual weight.
- **Impressions and a sense of knowing** — a quiet, settled conviction that arrives without being manufactured. Not an emotion, but something beneath emotion.
- **Images and imagination** — God sometimes speaks through pictures, symbols, or imaginative encounters during prayer. Ignatius built his Spiritual Exercises on this; the Psalms are saturated with it.
- **Dreams** — throughout Scripture (Genesis 37, Matthew 1–22), God speaks in dreams. Not every dream is from God, but some are.
- **The counsel of others** — a word spoken by a spiritual director, pastor, or trusted friend that arrives with unexpected resonance. “Many advisers make victory sure” (Proverbs 11:14).
- **Creation and circumstance** — “The heavens declare the glory of God” (Psalm 19:1). A walk, a season, an unexpected encounter can carry the voice of the Spirit.
- **Peace or disturbance** — the Ignatian tradition calls this consolation and desolation. A deepening peace often signals God’s direction; a persistent unease may signal something to attend to.

“For God does speak — now one way, now another — though no one perceives it.”

— **Job 33:14 (NIV)**

Discerning What You Hear

Not every impression, image, or inner prompting is from God. Scripture, reason, tradition, and community all play a role in discernment. Listening prayer without accountability is vulnerability; listening prayer with wise companions is one of God’s great gifts.

Three Tests for What You Hear

- 1. Scripture:** Does what you heard align with the whole counsel of Scripture? God does not contradict his written Word. If an impression conflicts with Scripture, it is not from God.
- 2. Character:** Does it reflect the character of God as revealed in Jesus? God's voice produces love, joy, peace, and truth (Galatians 5:22–23). The enemy's voice produces condemnation, fear, confusion, and pride.
- 3. Community:** Does it bear witness in the hearts of wise, trusted companions — a spiritual director, pastor, or mature believer? “Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisers they succeed” (Proverbs 15:22).

Forms of Contemplative and Listening Prayer

There is no single method of contemplative prayer. What follows are tested, historically-rooted forms — each with deep biblical and spiritual-direction roots, each accessible to ordinary Christians.

1. Centering Prayer

Centering Prayer, developed by Thomas Keating from the contemplative tradition, is a method of consenting to God's presence and action within. It is not about achieving an experience but about releasing the thinking self and resting in God.

How to practice it:

Choose a sacred word or phrase (such as “Abba,” “Jesus,” “Be Still and Know That He is God.”) as a symbol of your consent to God's presence.

Sit comfortably, close your eyes, and silently introduce your sacred word or phrase.

When thoughts, feelings, or distractions arise — and they will — gently return to your sacred word or phrase. Do not fight the thoughts; simply release them.

Sit in this open, receptive silence for 20 minutes. You may choose to start with five minutes. Some people practice centering prayer for 10 minutes in the morning and 10 minutes in the evening. Close with the Lord's Prayer or a brief prayer of gratitude.

“The Lord is in his holy temple; let all the earth be silent before him.”

— Habakkuk 2:20 (NIV)

2. Lectio Divina (Sacred Reading)

Lectio Divina is slow, attentive, prayerful reading of Scripture — not for information but for formation. It is listening for the word within the Word: the particular phrase or image God wishes to press into this moment of your life.

The four movements:

Lectio (Read): Read the passage slowly, aloud if possible. Let the words land without rushing.

Meditatio (Reflect): Read again. Notice what word, phrase, or image draws your attention. Sit with it. Let it resonate.

Oratio (Respond): Let what you received become prayer. Speak it back to God honestly — gratitude, question, confession, longing.

Contemplatio (Rest): Release words and simply rest in God’s presence. Receive. Let God speak in the silence that follows.

“Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path.”

— Psalm 119:105 (NIV)

3. The Prayer of Examen

The Examen, developed by Ignatius of Loyola, is a brief daily review of your day with God — noticing where God was present and where you drifted. It is listening prayer applied to lived experience.

The five movements (15–20 minutes):

1. Gratitude — Give thanks for the specific gifts of this day. Name them concretely.
2. Presence — Ask the Holy Spirit to illuminate your review. “See me, know me, search me” (Psalm 139:23).
3. Review — Walk through the day with God. Where did you feel most alive? Most depleted? Most fully yourself?
4. Response — Receive forgiveness for what needs it. Give thanks for what was good. Name what you noticed.
5. Renewal — Look toward tomorrow. Ask for what you need. Surrender the day to God.

“Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts.”

— Psalm 139:23 (NIV)

4. Ignatian Imaginative Prayer

In the Spiritual Exercises, Ignatius invites the pray-er to enter a Gospel scene imaginatively — to be present in the story, to see, hear, and feel it, and to notice what arises. This is not fantasy; it is a form of meditative encounter with the living Christ who is the same yesterday, today, and forever (Hebrews 13:8).

Example — John 21:1–19 (Jesus restores Peter):

Read the passage slowly. Then close your eyes and place yourself in the scene. You are on the shore in the early morning. Smell the lake. Feel the cool air. Watch the charcoal fire.

Notice: Are you Peter, full of shame? A disciple watching at a distance? Someone standing at the edge of the fire?

Let Jesus turn to you. What does he ask? What do you say? What does he say in return?

Journal what arose. Bring it to your spiritual director. Receive it as data, not doctrine — material for prayer, not private revelation.

Common Obstacles — and What to Do With Them

Most people who attempt contemplative prayer encounter the same difficulties. Knowing they are normal — and what to do with them — prevents discouragement.

Obstacle	Response
“My mind won’t stop”	This is not failure. A wandering mind is the universal condition of prayer. Each time you gently return to God, you have prayed. Return is the practice.
“I don’t feel anything”	Feelings are not the goal. “Dryness” is a normal season in the spiritual life — Ignatius calls it “desolation.” Stay. God is present whether you feel Him or not (Isaiah 45:15).
“I fall asleep”	Adjust your posture: sit upright with feet on the floor. Pray at a different time of day. If you still fall asleep — your body may be telling you something. Rest is also holy.
“I don’t know if I’m hearing God”	Bring what you receive to a spiritual director. Test it against Scripture. Hold it lightly. Discernment takes time, community, and practice.
“I feel guilty being still”	The productivity impulse runs deep. But Jesus said Mary chose the better part. Contemplative prayer is not laziness — it is the most important work you do.

Building a Contemplative Prayer Practice

Begin where you are, not where you wish you were. A sustainable practice, small and consistent, will form you more deeply than an ambitious one abandoned in two weeks.

Daily

- Begin with 5 minutes of silence before you read or speak. Simply be present to God.
- Use a single verse or short passage for Lectio Divina during your morning prayer.
- End the day with a brief Examen — five minutes, three questions: Where was God today? Where did I respond? What do I want to say to Him before I sleep?

Weekly

- Choose one longer period (20–30 minutes) for centering prayer or Ignatian imaginative prayer.
- Journal what you notice across the week — consolations, desolations, recurring images or Scriptures.

Monthly

- Bring your listening prayer to your spiritual director. What patterns do you notice? What has surprised you? What have you been reluctant to bring to God?
- Consider a quarterly personal retreat day where contemplative prayer is the primary practice.

A Word to the Skeptic

If contemplative prayer feels unfamiliar or even uncomfortable, that is a reasonable response for someone formed in an active, Word-centered, Spirit-empowered tradition. You are not being asked to abandon any of that. You are being invited to add receptivity to your activity — to become not only someone who speaks to God but someone who listens.

“Whether you turn to the right or to the left, your ears will hear a voice behind you, saying, “This is the way; walk in it.”” — Isaiah 30:21 (NIV)

Questions for Reflection and Consideration

On Stillness and Silence

- ▶ How much silence do you currently experience in a typical day? Is it chosen or merely accidental? What would it look like to protect a small amount of daily silence?
- ▶ What do you notice when you try to be still? What arises — anxiety, restlessness, relief, emotion? What might that tell you?
- ▶ Do you believe God still speaks to ordinary people today? If you have doubts, what are they? Have you brought them honestly to God?

On Listening

- ▶ Can you identify a time when you sensed God speaking to you — through Scripture, an impression, a person, or an event? How did you respond?
- ▶ Is there something you have been sensing from God that you have been reluctant to act on or even acknowledge? What is holding you back?
- ▶ Who helps you test what you hear? Do you have a spiritual director, confessor, or trusted companion with whom you can bring the interior life?

On Practice

- ▶ Which of the four forms of contemplative prayer described here is most appealing to you? Which feels most foreign? Why?
- ▶ What is the smallest, most realistic change you could make to create space for listening prayer this week?
- ▶ What would need to change — in your schedule, your environment, or your expectations of prayer — for contemplative prayer to become a sustained practice?

An Invitation

You do not need to be a mystic to pray contemplatively. You need only to be willing — willing to be still, willing to listen, willing to receive what God gives rather than what you came expecting. The voice that spoke the world into being still speaks. Come and listen.

“Samuel said, “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.”” — 1 Samuel 3:9 (NIV)