

## *Unconventional Wisdom #107*

### Listening and Longing

by

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You'll often hear me talking about talking to God. But you don't hear me talking much about listening to God. In part, because I don't want to imply that I'm an expert at some super-double-secret spiritual exercise. But mostly because I'm just not very good at it.

Further complicating my lack of listening proficiency, is what feels like (and I don't know how else to say this) a certain degree of divine disinterest in the matter. That is, even when I think I'm all-ears, my heavenly hotline is not exactly ringing off the hook.

Of course, I do know that God speaks to me through Scripture, as the Holy Spirit opens my heart and mind to his timeless truths and their relevance to my experience today. In fact, I'd say that our communication works pretty well on that level. But sometimes I just have questions, you know? Or could use some good advice in plain English.

For me, this has always been one of the great mysteries of theology. God has gone to great lengths to establish a relationship with me. And now he even invites me to enter into his very presence. So, I see no particular impediment to God just carrying on a dialogue with me (or any other believer). He could even do so audibly if he wanted to. So why is it that prayer remains mostly a monologue?

I get God's right to his own personal space. It's his universe. And his holiness. He can certainly express himself however he chooses. It's just that, given the divine-human intimacy implied by an indwelling Holy Spirit, I somehow expected that our communication would be a bit more bilateral.

I say all that, so that you'll understand my less-than-expectant mindset, when what happened the other morning happened. I was awake but still in bed. In fact, I was praying (and trying my best to listen), when I had this sudden flash, like spiritual breaking news.

In my mind's eye a Scripture reference suddenly appeared—Psalm 123:5. Clear as day. Then, that same series of letters and numbers began drifting across my consciousness, occupying all of the available bandwidth.

Well, that's cryptic, I thought. And not the kind of thing that regularly/ever pops into my naturally skeptical brain. So, maybe there's something I need to check out in Psalm 123:5.

I got up, threw on some clothes I'd conveniently left lying by the bed, and walked in the direction of my home office. I have to confess that along the way I was already lowering any life-altering expectations. I just hoped this wasn't one of those embarrassing verses about enemies being dashed to pieces.

My red leather Bible sat atop a stack of books just inside the office door. I flipped it open to near its center point and then paged over toward the passage in question. As my eyes scanned the text, my breathing suddenly stopped. Psalm 123 has only four verses!

Does God have a sense of humor? I think so. But is it funnier when it's not directed at you? I think so.

Maybe the message is: Scott, there are some things you're good at, but this isn't one of them. So, why not just leave the listening to somebody who's better wired for it?

Or perhaps this whole Psalm 123:5 thing is just the product of my imagination. But why, then, that particular reference? Out of 150 psalms, what are the odds of randomly identifying the only psalm with exactly four verses—so tantalizingly close to the target reference?

I suppose it's going to take a while to work out the moral of this story. But one thing became immediately clear—and perhaps curiously so—that I would not, indeed, could not quit listening to God.

Because here's what I realized: that I'm not listening because I'm good at it, or because it gets results. I'm listening because I'm longing.

Longing is, I think, the only faithful response to life in a world of the desired and the promised but the not-yet. As long as we're looking "through a glass darkly," but yearning for "face-to-face." And I express that longing by listening. So, even if I don't know what I'm doing, I really can't quit doing it.

And that brings me back to Psalm 123:5. Is it merely a reminder of my broader, bumbling efforts to listen to God? Or could it be a reminder that there is, in fact, more to come? Does it invite me to look backward or forward? A blank answer, or a fill-in-the-blank answer?

Yes, it's definitely going to take a while to work out the moral of this story.