

# WHISPER



How to Hear  
the Voice of God

SNEAK  
PEEK



SAMPLE  
ONLY

# Mark Batterson

*New York Times* Best-Selling Author

Praise for  
*Whisper*

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—MAX LUCADO, pastor and author

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*Dedicated to Paul McGarvey, a mentor in ministry.  
You prayed a prayer in August of 1984 that  
God answered on July 2, 2016.*

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## Prologue

# THE TOMATIS EFFECT

*Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening.*

—1 SAMUEL 3:9

**M**ore than half a century ago, Dr. Alfred Tomatis was confronted with the most curious case of his fifty-year career as an otolaryngologist. A renowned opera singer had mysteriously lost his ability to hit certain notes even though those notes were well within his vocal range. He had been to other ear, nose, and throat specialists, all of whom thought it was a vocal problem. Dr. Tomatis thought otherwise.

Using a sonometer, Dr. Tomatis discovered that even an average opera singer produces 140-decibel sound waves at a meter's distance.<sup>1</sup> That's slightly louder than a military jet taking off from an aircraft carrier. And the sound is even louder inside one's skull. That discovery led to a diagnosis: the opera singer had been deafened by the sound of his own voice. Selective muteness was caused by selective deafness. If you can't hear a note, you can't sing that note. In Dr. Tomatis's words, "The voice can only reproduce what the ear can hear."<sup>2</sup>

The French Academy of Medicine dubbed it the Tomatis effect.

I'm guessing you, like me, have your fair share of problems. And your problem-solving techniques might be as effective as mine, which isn't very. Maybe that's because we're treating symptoms while ignoring the root cause: a spiritual Tomatis effect. Is it possible that what we perceive to be relational, emotional, and spiritual problems are actually hearing problems—

ears that have been deafened to the voice of God? And it's that inability to hear His voice that causes us to lose our voice and lose our way.

Let me make a bold statement at the beginning of this book: Learning how to hear the voice of God is the solution to a thousand problems! It's also the key to discovering our destiny and fulfilling our potential.

His voice is love.

His voice is power.

His voice is healing.

His voice is wisdom.

His voice is joy.

If your life is off-key, maybe it's because you've been deafened by the negative self-talk that doesn't let God get a Word in edgewise! Maybe you've listened to the voice of criticism so long you can't believe anything else about yourself. Or maybe it's the Enemy's voice of condemnation that speaks lies about who you really are. If you don't silence those competing voices, they'll eventually deafen you. You won't be able to sing God's song because you won't be able to hear His voice.

Is God's voice the loudest voice in your life?

That's the question.

If the answer is no, that's the problem.

We live in a culture where everyone wants to have his or her voice heard but has so little to say. And that's because we do so little listening, especially to God. The best way to get people to listen to us is for us to listen to God. Why? Because we'll have something to say that is worth hearing.

Ultimately, all of us need to find our voice. And by voice I mean the unique message God wants to speak through our lives. But finding our voice starts with hearing His voice.

Would you be willing to pray a bold prayer at the beginning of this book? It's an ancient prayer. It's a prayer that can change the trajectory of your life, just as it did for a prophet named Samuel. Before you pray it, let me issue one warning. If you aren't willing to listen to *everything* God has to say, you eventually won't hear *anything* He has to say. If you want to hear His comforting voice, you have to listen to His convicting voice. And it's

often what we want to hear *least* that we need to hear *most*. Trust me, though, you want to hear what He has to say.

Are you ready?

Here's the seven-word prayer that can change your life:

Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening.<sup>3</sup>

That prayer is easier said than done, no doubt. But if you meant what you just prayed, your life is about to change for the better.



Part One

# THE POWER OF A WHISPER



# THE BRAVEST PRAYER

*After the fire came a gentle whisper.*

—1 KINGS 19:12

On the morning of August 27, 1883, ranchers in Alice Springs, Australia, heard what sounded like gunshots.<sup>1</sup> The same mysterious sound was reported in fifty geographical locations spanning one-thirteenth of the globe. What those Aussies heard was the eruption of a volcano on the remote Indonesian island of Krakatoa 2,233 miles away!

That volcanic eruption, possibly the loudest sound ever measured, was so loud that the 310-decibel sound waves circumnavigated the globe at least four times. It generated three-thousand-foot tidal waves, threw rocks a distance of thirty-four miles, and cracked one-foot-thick concrete three hundred miles away!<sup>2</sup>

If you were to drill a hole directly through the center of the earth, opposite of Krakatoa you would find Colombia, South America. Although the sound of the eruption wasn't audible in Colombia, there was a measurable spike in atmospheric pressure because of infrasonic sound waves that caused the air to tense. The sound may not have been *heard*, but it was *felt*, all the way around the world. According to science journalist and *New York Times* columnist Maggie Koerth-Baker, "Just because you can't hear a sound doesn't mean it isn't there."<sup>3</sup>

At low levels sound is imperceptible.

At high levels it's unignorable.

If sound exceeds 110 decibels, we experience a change in blood pressure. At 141 decibels we become nauseous. At 145 decibels our vision blurs because our eyeballs vibrate. At 195 decibels our eardrums are in danger of rupturing. And death by sound waves can happen at 202 decibels.<sup>4</sup>

The act of hearing is detecting vibrations of the eardrum caused by sound waves, and the intensity of those waves is measured in decibels. On one end of the sound spectrum is the sperm whale, the loudest animal on earth. The clicking noise it uses to echolocate can hit 200 decibels. Even more impressive, researchers believe that whale songs may travel up to ten thousand miles underwater!<sup>5</sup> Next to the sperm whale is jet engines (150 decibels), air horns (129 decibels), thunderclaps (120 decibels), and jackhammers (100 decibels).<sup>6</sup>

What's on the other end of the sound spectrum?

A whisper, measuring just 15 decibels.

Technically speaking, our absolute threshold of hearing is 0 decibels. That corresponds to a sound wave measuring 0.0000002 pascals, which causes the eardrum to vibrate by just  $10^{-8}$  millimeters. That's less than a billionth of the ambient pressure in the air around us and smaller than the diameter of a hydrogen atom!<sup>7</sup>

Juxtapose that with this:

Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake came a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper.<sup>8</sup>

The ESV calls it “a low whisper.”

The NASB calls it “a gentle blowing.”

The KJV calls it “a still small voice.”

We tend to dismiss as insignificant the natural phenomena that preceded the whisper because God was not in them, but I bet they got Elijah's

attention. God has an outside voice, and He's not afraid to use it. But when God wants to be heard, when what He has to say is too important to miss, He often speaks in a whisper just above the absolute threshold of hearing.

The question, of course, is *why*.

And *how*.

And *when* and *where*.

Those are the questions we'll explore and seek to answer in the pages that follow.

## The Sound of Silence

The Hebrew word for “whisper,” *demamah*, can be translated “silence” or “stillness” or “calmness.” Simon and Garfunkel weren't far off with the title of their 1964 hit single, “The Sound of Silence.” The same Hebrew word is used to describe the way God delivers us from our distress: “He stilled the storm to a whisper; the waves of the sea were hushed.”<sup>10</sup> And that psalm foreshadows the way Jesus would stop a storm in its tracks with three words: “Quiet! Be still!”<sup>11</sup>

His whisper is gentle, but nothing is more powerful.

My dictionary defines *whisper* as “speaking very softly using one's breath without one's vocal cords.” The use of breath instead of vocal cords is significant. Isn't that how God created Adam? He whispered into the dust and named it Adam.

Adam was once a whisper.

So were you.

So was everything else.

Whispering is typically employed for the sake of secrecy. No form of communication is more intimate. And it seems to be God's preferred method.<sup>12</sup> The question again is *why*. And I won't keep you guessing any longer.

When someone speaks in a whisper, you have to get very close to hear. In fact, you have to put your ear near the person's mouth. We lean toward a whisper, and that's what God wants. The goal of hearing the heavenly

Father's voice isn't just hearing His voice; it's intimacy with Him. That's why He speaks in a whisper. He wants to be as close to us as is divinely possible! He loves us, likes us, that much.

When our children were young, I would occasionally play a little trick on them. I'd speak in a whisper so they would inch closer to me. That's when I'd grab them and hug them. God plays the same trick on us. We want to hear what He has to say, but He wants us to know how much He loves us.

"The voice of the Spirit is as gentle as a zephyr," said Oswald Chambers. "So gentle that unless you are living in perfect communion with God, you never hear it."<sup>13</sup> Aren't you grateful for a gentle God? The Almighty could intimidate us with His outside voice, but He woos us with a whisper. And His whisper is the very breath of life.

Chambers continued, "The checks of the Spirit come in the most extraordinarily gentle ways, and if you are not sensitive enough to detect His voice you will quench it, and your personal spiritual life will be impaired. His checks always come as a still small voice, so small that no one but the saint notices them."<sup>14</sup>

## Once a Whisper

For the past two decades, I've had the joy and privilege of pastoring National Community Church in Washington, DC, and I wouldn't want to be anyplace else doing anything else with anyone else. I'm living the dream, but that dream was once a whisper.

The genesis of the dream goes all the way back to a cow pasture in Alexandria, Minnesota, where I heard the still small voice of God. I had just finished my freshman year at the University of Chicago, where I was a PERL (politics, economics, rhetoric, and law) major. Law school was Plan A, but that was before I asked God a dangerous question: *What do You want me to do with my life?* Of course, it's far more dangerous *not* to ask Him that question!

In retrospect I've dubbed that summer between my freshman and

sophomore years of college my “summer of seeking.” For the first time in my life, I got serious about getting up early in the morning to pray. And it wasn’t just a religious ritual. I was desperate to hear His voice, and maybe that’s why I finally did.

At the end of the summer, our family was vacationing at Lake Ida in Alexandria, Minnesota. I decided to do a long prayer walk down some dirt roads. For some reason walking helps my talking. I’m able to pray with more focus and listen with less distraction. At one point I went off road through a cow pasture. As I meandered my way around cow patties, I heard what I would describe as the inaudible yet unmistakable voice of God. In that moment at that place, I knew that God was calling me into full-time ministry. It wasn’t words as much as it was a feeling, a sense of calling. And that one whisper prompted me to give up a full-ride scholarship at the University of Chicago and transfer to Central Bible College in Springfield, Missouri. That move made no academic sense whatsoever and was second-guessed by more than a few people in my life, but that’s often the way His whisper works.

Those who dance are thought mad by those who hear not the music.

That old adage is certainly true of those who walk to the beat of God’s drum. When you take your cues from the Holy Spirit, you’ll do some things that will make people think you’re crazy. So be it. Obey the whisper and see what God does.

More than two decades of ministry have come and gone since that prayer walk through a cow pasture. National Community has grown into one church with eight campuses over the past twenty years, but each campus was once a whisper. I’ve written fifteen books over the past ten years, but each book was once a whisper. Every sermon I preach and every book I write are echoes of that one whisper in the middle of a cow pasture in the middle of nowhere.

Nothing has the potential to change your life like the whisper of God. Nothing will determine your destiny more than your ability to hear His still small voice.

That’s how you discern the good, pleasing, and perfect will of God.

That's how you see and seize divine appointments.  
That's how God-sized dreams are birthed.  
That's how miracles happen.

### The Bravest Prayer

There are days, and then there are days that alter every day thereafter. For me, one of those life-altering days is July 2, 2016. Next to the day I was married, the days my kids were born, and the day I almost died, no day is more sacred. In fact, I can tell you exactly how many days it's been from that day to this day.

I was kicking off a series of sermons titled "Mountains Move" and challenged our church to pray the bravest prayer they could pray. By bravest prayer I mean the prayer you can barely believe God for because it seems impossible. It's often the prayer you've prayed a hundred times that hasn't been answered, but you pray it one more time anyway. For me the bravest prayer was that He would heal my asthma. And it was brave because asthma is all I had ever known.

My very first childhood memory is of a middle-of-the-night asthma attack followed by a frantic trip to the emergency room for a shot of epinephrine. That routine was repeated more times than I can remember. There weren't forty days in forty years that I did not need to take a puff of my albuterol inhaler, and I never went anywhere without it. Never ever. Then I prayed my bravest prayer, and I haven't taken a single puff of an inhaler from that day to this day. That's why I literally count the days, because each day is more miraculous than the last.

Over the span of forty years, I must have prayed hundreds of times that God would heal my asthma. But for reasons known only to Him, those prayers went unanswered.

Why did I keep praying?

The short answer is one whisper.

Right before my freshman year of high school, I was hospitalized for a severe asthma attack that landed me in the intensive care unit. It was one of

a dozen such hospitalizations during my younger years. When I was released from Edward's Hospital a week later, Pastor Paul McGarvey and a prayer team from Calvary Church in Naperville, Illinois, came over to our house, laid hands on me, and prayed that God would heal my asthma.

God answered that prayer for healing but not in the way I expected.

When I woke up the next morning, I still had asthma, but all the warts on my feet had mysteriously disappeared. I'm not kidding! At first I wondered if God had made a mistake. Maybe the signals between here and heaven were mixed. I couldn't help but wonder if someone somewhere was breathing great but still had warts on his or her feet. I was a little confused, but that's when I heard the still small voice. It wasn't an audible voice; it was Spirit to spirit. And it was loud and clear: *Mark, I just wanted you to know that I'm able!*

All these decades later it still sends a chill down my spine. I was fourteen years old, and it was the first time I heard God's whisper. Was I disappointed that He hadn't answered my prayer the way I wanted Him to? Of course I was. But those two words echoed for three decades: *I'm able*. And He's not just able; He's "able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us."<sup>15</sup>

Let me connect the dots.

Without that whisper I'm not sure I would have had the faith to pray the bravest prayer. And if I hadn't prayed that prayer, how could God answer it? After all, God doesn't answer 100 percent of the prayers we don't pray! You can guess where this is going, can't you? My miracle was once a whisper. And that's true of every miracle. As I survey my life, I realize that the genesis of every blessing, every breakthrough is the breath of God. It started out as nothing more than a still small voice.

Ebenezers, the coffeehouse on Capitol Hill that our church owns and operates, is a perfect example. When people walk by Ebenezers, they see a coffeehouse, but when I walk by it, I hear a whisper. That's all it was two decades ago. Actually, it was a graffiti-covered building with cinder blocks in the doorframes. Then one day I walked by and a Spirit-inspired thought fired across my synapses: *This crack house would make a great coffeehouse.*

That thought came out of nowhere, which sometimes indicates something supernatural. I call it a God idea, and I'd rather have one God idea than a thousand good ideas. Good ideas are good, but God ideas change the course of history.

That God idea turned into a brave prayer, which turned into a coffeehouse that has been voted the number-one coffeehouse in DC more than once. Since opening the doors a decade ago, we've given more than a million dollars to kingdom causes from its net profits. But every shot we pull and every dollar we give was once a whisper.

### The Think Tank of the Soul

For the past thirty-plus years, an acoustic ecologist named Gordon Hempton has compiled what he calls "The List of the Last Great Quiet Places." It consists of places with at least fifteen minutes of uninterrupted quiet during daylight hours. At last count there were only twelve quiet places in the entire United States!<sup>16</sup> And we wonder why the soul suffers. As Hempton noted, "Quiet is a think tank of the soul."<sup>17</sup>

Simply put, God often speaks loudest when we're quietest.

Seventeenth-century French philosopher Blaise Pascal once observed, "The sole cause of man's unhappiness is that he does not know how to stay quietly in his room."<sup>18</sup>

That's quite a statement, but it's not an overstatement. If our problems are hearing problems—the spiritual Tomatis effect—then the solution to those problems is a prescription that is as old as the psalms. It's so critical to our spiritual vitality that it's worth meditating on one word or phrase at a time:

Be.

Be still.

Be still, and know.

Be still, and know that I am God.<sup>19</sup>

Have you ever tried to quiet a loud room? Attempting to yell above the crowd usually doesn't work, does it? It's far more effective to shush the crowd with a *shhh*. That's the method God employs. His whisper quiets us, calms us, stills us.

By definition, white noise is a sound that contains every frequency a human can hear.<sup>20</sup> And because it contains every frequency, it's very difficult to hear any frequency, especially the still small voice of God. As such, chronic noise may be the greatest impediment to our spiritual growth. And it's not just spirituality that suffers.

In a study of elementary-age students at a grade school in Manhattan, psychologist Arlene Bronzaft found that children assigned to classrooms on the side of the school facing the elevated train tracks were eleven months behind their counterparts on the quieter side of the building. After New York City Transit installed noise-abatement equipment on the tracks, a follow-up study found no difference between the groups.<sup>21</sup>

When our lives get loud, with noise filling every frequency, we lose our sense of being. We run the risk of turning into human doings rather than human beings. And when our schedules get busy, we lose our sense of balance, which is a function of the inner ear.

Can I go out on a limb?

Your life is too loud.

Your schedule is too busy.

That's how and why and when we forget that God is God. And it takes very little to distract us. "I neglect God and his angels, for the noise of a fly," said the English poet John Donne.<sup>22</sup> The solution? Stillness. Or more specifically, His still small voice.

Silence is anything but passive waiting. It's proactive listening. The noted author and professor Henri Nouwen believed that silence was an act of war against the competing voices within us. And that war isn't easily won, because it's a daily battle. But each day God's voice gets a little louder in our lives until He's all we can hear. "Every time you listen with great attentiveness to the voice that calls you the Beloved," said Nouwen, "you

will discover within yourself a desire to hear that voice longer and more deeply.”<sup>23</sup>

### Songs of Deliverance

Over the past decade I’ve recorded a dozen audiobooks with a brilliant sound engineer named Brad Smiley. During our last recording session, Brad told me about standard operating procedure for sound mixers in the film and music industries. Before going into the studio, they let their ears relax and recalibrate through absolute silence. Only then are they ready to listen, really listen. Acoustic ecologists call the process ear cleaning.

The quietest room in the world is the anechoic chamber at Orfield Laboratories in Minneapolis. One-foot-thick concrete walls and three-foot-thick fiberglass acoustic wedges absorb 99.99 percent of sound. Background noise measures -9.4 decibels.<sup>24</sup> All you hear in an anechoic chamber is the sound of your heart beating, blood circulating, and lungs breathing. That’s the sound of silence, and it reminds us that it’s in God that “we live and move and have our being.”<sup>25</sup>

If you want to hear the heart of God, silence is key.

If you want the Spirit of God to fill you, be still.

The psalmists didn’t have an anechoic chamber to retreat to, so they retreated to God. They referred to Him as their refuge, their fortress, and their ever-present help in time of need. They spoke of the “shelter of the Most High” and the “shadow of the Almighty.”<sup>26</sup> But my favorite descriptor might be the “hiding place.”

You are my hiding place;  
 you will protect me from trouble  
 and surround me with songs of deliverance.<sup>27</sup>

Did you know that God is singing songs of deliverance all around you all the time? You can’t hear them because they’re outside your range of hearing, but you’re surrounded by a sonic shield. Those songs of deliverance

are powerful enough to break any bondage, overcome any addiction, and solve any problem. Those songs are the reason no weapon formed against you will prosper.<sup>28</sup>

Remember, the voice can reproduce only what the ear can hear. I'm not sure what problem you need to solve or what issue you need to resolve, but my prayer is that you'll learn to discern His voice. When you do, His songs of deliverance can set you free!

Quit hiding *from* God.

Hide yourself *in* Him.

### An Eighth Rest

One of the most played pieces of classical music is Beethoven's *Symphony No. 5* in C minor. It's immediately recognizable because of its iconic opening, a four-note motif that is among the most famous in Western music. But did you know that it actually begins with silence? Beethoven inserted an eighth rest before the first note.<sup>29</sup>

Beethoven's Fifth is so familiar to us that it's difficult to re-create the full effect it had when it debuted at Vienna's Theater an der Wien on December 22, 1808. And although it's difficult to discern Beethoven's original intent, that eighth rest served as a sonic buffer. At the beginning of a concert there is ambient noise: conversations between concertgoers, a few stragglers finding their seats, the rustling of programs. A bit of silence at the beginning of a symphony is ear cleaning, even if it's only an eighth rest. It was silence that set up that symphony, and the same is true of our lives.

We need more eighth rests, don't we? Especially if we want our lives to be symphonies of God's grace. I would recommend an eighth rest at the beginning and end of the day—a few moments to collect our thoughts, count our blessings, and pray our prayers. We also need a day of rest one day a week. Rest is so important that the Sabbath is one of God's Ten Commandments. And if you can afford the time, I would recommend a two-day silent retreat once a year. In my opinion you can't afford not to. Make sure you tell someone where you're going and how long you'll be gone, but cut off

# THE KEY OF KEYS

## The First Language: Scripture

*All Scripture is God-breathed.*

—2 TIMOTHY 3:16

On April 14, 1755, General Edward Braddock sailed up the Potomac River to Georgetown, a sleepy little town on the banks of the river. The British army anchored long enough to pick up a new recruit, a twenty-three-year-old Virginia planter named George Washington. Washington served as Braddock's aide-de-camp during the ill-fated Battle of the Monongahela, and it's a miracle he survived. Two horses were shot out from under him, and four musket balls passed through his coat. Washington didn't just hear musket balls whistling past his ears; he heard the still small voice whispering. "Death was leveling my Companions on every side of me," wrote Washington in a letter to his brother. "But, by the All-powerful Dispensations of Providence, I have been protected."<sup>1</sup>

Now let's go back to the place where Braddock anchored his ship. In the city named after Washington, just past the place where Constitution Avenue turns into the Theodore Roosevelt Bridge, there is a nondescript stone well with a small historical marker beside it. There is a manhole cover on top of it and a ladder inside of it. Sixteen feet below the surface is a rock: Braddock's Rock. It marks the place where General Braddock first landed, and it's the oldest landmark in the nation's capital.

According to legend some of that rock was used as foundation stone for the White House and Capitol. But the true significance of that stone is that it served as the starting point for the earliest surveys of Washington, DC. On old maps it's inscribed as the Key of Keys. That was the name given to Braddock's Rock because it established the coordinate system for the entire city. Every principal meridian and baseline was measured from that initial point.

Whether we're aware of it or not, we all have a key of keys.

Epistemology is the branch of philosophy concerned with the nature of knowledge. It asks, "How do we know that we know?" And whether we consciously construct it or not, we all have an epistemological starting point by which we survey all of life. It establishes our moral baseline, delineating between right and wrong. For some, it fluctuates as much as the latest fad. For others, it's as fixed as the scientific method. For me, it's as tried and true as the Bible. And I make no apologies for that. The Bible is not just my starting point; it's the final authority when it comes to matters of faith and doctrine. I believe the Bible to be the inspired Word of God—Truth with a capital *T*.

The challenge is that we live in a culture where tolerance has been elevated above truth. It's considered wrong to say that something is wrong, and I think that's wrong. I certainly want to be known more for what I'm *for* than what I'm *against*. And truth shouldn't be used as a weapon. But to think that everybody is right and nobody is wrong is as silly as pretending that everybody wins and nobody loses. Come on, you know the T-batters are keeping track of the score! And even if *not* keeping score works for one season in Little League, it doesn't work in the real world. When truth is sacrificed on the altar of tolerance, it might seem as though everybody wins, but in reality everybody loses. God calls us to a higher standard than tolerance. It's called truth, and it's always coupled with grace.<sup>2</sup>

Grace means *I'll love you no matter what.*

Truth means *I'll be honest with you no matter what.*

That's my principal meridian.  
Now let me back up just a bit.

### Prized Possession

I have a twenty-five-year addiction that started with the eight-hundred-page biography of Albert Einstein I read in college.<sup>3</sup> I fell in love with books, and I started reading anything and everything I could get my hands on. Part of that love of learning was Einstein's exhortation in that very book: "Never lose a holy curiosity."<sup>4</sup> Part of it was pure necessity.

When I started pastoring National Community Church, I lacked both ministry experience and life experience. My ministry résumé included one summer internship and one failed church plant. That's it. My life experience amounted to just twenty-five trips around the sun, and it was a rather sheltered existence at that. I needed to borrow as much experience as I could, and I did that through books.

Around that time I heard that the average author invests approximately two years of life experience into every book he or she writes, so I figured I was gaining two years of life experience with every book I read. In my twenties I averaged reading more than two hundred books a year, so I was gaining four hundred years of life experience each year! To date, I've read at least thirty-five hundred books, so I'm at least seven thousand years old in book years!

Simply put, I love books. But one book falls in a category of its own: the Bible. At least two things make the Bible absolutely unique. First, it is "living and active."<sup>5</sup> We don't just read the Bible; the Bible reads us. The Spirit who inspired the ancient writers as they wrote is the same Spirit who inspires modern-day readers as they read. The Holy Spirit is on both sides of the equation. The apostle Paul described Scripture as "God-breathed."<sup>6</sup> When we read Scripture, we're inhaling what the Holy Spirit exhaled thousands of years ago. We're hearing the whisper of God in breath tones.

Second, we never get to the bottom of the Bible. According to rabbinic

tradition, every word of Scripture has seventy faces and six hundred thousand meanings.<sup>7</sup> In other words, it's kaleidoscopic. No matter how many times we read the Bible, it never gets old, because it's timeless and timely.

The Bible was composed by more than forty writers over fifteen centuries in three languages on three continents. Those authors range from farmers and fishermen and kings to poets, prophets, and prisoners of war. It covers nearly every subject matter under the sun: law and history, poetry and prophecy, cosmology and theology. Yet despite the fact that it touches on hundreds of controversial topics, it doesn't contradict itself.<sup>8</sup> In fact, it reads like one book from start to finish. And that's because there is one Author, the Spirit of God.

We take the Bible for granted, and I think that's because we can get it in dozens of different translations with any type and color of cover we want. But let's not forget that ancient scribes would devote entire lifetimes to making *one copy* of the sacred text, and translators such as John Wycliffe and William Tyndale gave their lives to provide us their translations.

My most prized earthly possession is a time-tattered Bible that belonged to my grandfather Elmer Johnson. The pages of the third improved edition of the 1934 Thompson Chain-Reference Bible are worn thin from use, so thin that my grandfather had to tape them together. I love reading the verses he underlined and the notes he scribbled in the margins. This might sound mystical, but that Bible connects me to my grandfather in a way that escapes words. And his well-used Bible is a testament to his well-lived life. It reminds me of something Charles Spurgeon said: "A Bible that's falling apart usually belongs to someone who isn't."<sup>9</sup>

## Bibliolatry

Reading the Bible cover to cover is a spiritual best practice, and there is no better way to learn to discern God's voice. Theologian J. I. Packer went so far as to say, "Every Christian worth his salt ought to read the Bible from cover to cover every year."<sup>10</sup> Most of us fall short on that count, but it's hard

to argue with, isn't it? However, the goal isn't getting through the Bible; the goal is getting the Bible through us.

There is a very subtle form of idolatry called bibliolatry. It involves treating the Bible as an end in itself instead of a means to an end. The goal of Bible knowledge isn't just Bible knowledge. After all, "knowledge puffs up."<sup>11</sup> The goal is learning to recognize and respond to your heavenly Father's voice so you can grow in intimacy with Him.

But make no mistake, the Bible can be misused and abused. You have to look no further than the devil himself, who tried to use Scripture to tempt Jesus: "If you are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread."<sup>12</sup> That was a low blow, considering that Jesus had been fasting for forty days. But we do the same thing when we use truth to bully others. Yes, the Bible is our sword. It's our best offense, our best defense. But when we misinterpret the truth, we're abusing the Bible. Remember how Jesus responded? By rightly dividing the Word: "Man does not live on bread alone."<sup>13</sup>

We need to heed Paul's exhortation: "Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth."<sup>14</sup> If we don't rightly divide the Word of God, we divide the body of Christ. And that's the opposite of holiness, which means "wholeness."

I have a little formula that I share quite frequently: the Holy Spirit + caffeine = awesome. As the pastor of a church that owns a coffeehouse, I'm not joking. And my office is right above the coffeehouse! But here's a more serious equation: Holy Scripture – Holy Spirit = bibliolatry. When we take the Holy Spirit out of the equation, we're left with the letter of the law. And the letter of the law isn't life giving. What you end up with is rule lawyering like the Pharisees and a lifeless religion called legalism.

One of the jobs of the Holy Spirit is quickening, and it's the difference between information and transformation. Ironically, *quicken* is the same word used to describe physical resurrection.<sup>15</sup> In much the same way, the Holy Spirit defibrillates our spirits with His Word so we experience a little resurrection every time we read God's Word.

He brings dreams back to life.

He revives faith, hope, and love.  
He delivers on promises we've given up on.

### The Transitive Property

On the morning of August 16, 1996, I was just three verses into the book of Joshua when God quickened a promise that jumped off the page and into my spirit.

I will give you every place where you set your foot, as I promised  
Moses.<sup>16</sup>

As I read that promise, I felt prompted to pray a perimeter all the way around Capitol Hill, the place God had called us to pastor. I immediately embarked on a 4.7-mile prayer walk, which I detail in *The Circle Maker*. When I prayed that prayer, I never thought we'd own a single piece of property, and that wasn't the original intent. But God has reasons that are often beyond human reason. Two decades later we own half a dozen properties, valued at more than \$50 million, on that prayer circle. Coincidence? I think not.

One of those miracle properties is a 125-year-old castle that sits on a city block we purchased for \$29 million. First of all, I did not have a category for that kind of price tag twenty years ago. I still don't. But it's no coincidence that we signed the contract on the castle eighteen years *to the day* after I prayed that circle. My point? Each of those properties was once a whisper. That quickening had a net worth of at least \$50 million, and it continues to compound interest.

I know some would argue that this promise was meant for Joshua, not me. Trust me, I don't believe in pulling God's promises out of a hat like a rabbit and claiming them out of context. But let me push back a little on this point. This promise wasn't even for Joshua in the first place; it was for Moses. So there is a transitive property at play. Just as God transferred that promise from Moses to Joshua, God transferred that promise from Joshua

to me. If that seems like a stretch, remember what 2 Corinthians 1:20 says: “No matter how many promises God has made, they are ‘Yes’ in Christ.” If you’re in Christ, all of God’s promises belong to you. Each one has your name on it, and the Spirit will quicken different promises at different times. It’s one of the ways God whispers.

When Christ returns, the Spirit of God will quicken our earthly bodies. Bodies that are buried six feet deep will be unearthed, and those that have been cremated will rematerialize. But He quickens in more ways than one. Sometimes it’s a thought that fires across our synapses. Sometimes it’s a prompting to step up, step in, or step out in faith. Sometimes it’s speaking the right word at the right time. And sometimes it’s a verse of Scripture that jumps off the page and into our spirits.

The psalmist said, “Quicken thou me according to thy word.”<sup>17</sup> That word *quicken* is repeated no less than eleven times in the King James Version of Psalm 119. When the Bible says something more than once, we ought to listen to it at least twice.

This may be a little grotesque, but let me paint a picture in a way you probably won’t forget. I was channel surfing recently when I came across a rerun of *Mission: Impossible III*, starring Tom Cruise, who plays the role of Impossible Missions Force agent Ethan Hunt. I landed there right when a micro-explosive device was shot through his nose and implanted in his brain. Sorry, that’s the grotesque part. And this is a crude example. But the quickening of the Holy Spirit is like a truth bomb that gets implanted in your mind, your heart, and your spirit. When you hide His Word in your heart, you never know when the Spirit of God will make it go off. And that’s a good thing!

Here’s how it works for me. I usually open my Bible to wherever I left off in my reading plan. I start reading and keep reading until I come to a verse that gives me cause to pause. Sometimes I find the text confusing, so I’ll do some additional research. Sometimes I find the text convicting, which leads to confession. And sometimes the text sparks a prompting that I pray into.

One minor caution at this point. Some people employ a flip-and-point

approach to the Bible. It's like the guy who was looking for a little inspiration, so he flipped his Bible open and pointed to the verse that says "[Judas] went away and hanged himself."<sup>18</sup> That wasn't very inspiring, so he tried it again. The next verse he flipped to said "Go and do likewise."<sup>19</sup>

I would highly recommend a more methodical approach to the Bible. Why not download a reading plan from YouVersion and read it cover to cover? I'd even recommend a new translation every few years to keep the Word fresh. One way or another, get into God's Word so His Word gets into you. Then the Holy Spirit can quicken it when and where and how He wants.

### Deeper Than Cortex

At the age of just twenty-eight, Denny McNabb suffered arrhythmic heart failure. He was resuscitated, but ten minutes without oxygen caused irreparable brain damage. The associate director of East Central Illinois Campus Life lost his memory and with it his history and personality. Denny came out of a coma thirty days later, but he didn't recognize family or friends. He repeated the same question over and over. And his brain became like Teflon; nothing seemed to stick.

My friend and spiritual father, Dick Foth, had an appointment scheduled with Denny the day of his heart attack. That appointment turned into months of hospital visits and some agonizing questions. Chief among them was, how could God let this happen? One day Dick took out his frustration on a hospital elevator, almost breaking his hand. That's when he heard God's gentle whisper: *Dick, I can handle any question you ask Me. You just don't have a large enough frame of reference to handle the answer.*

We'll dive deeper into some of those difficult questions when we explore the language of pain, but it's worth citing something C. S. Lewis said: "Can a mortal ask questions which God finds unanswerable? Quite easily, I should think. All nonsense questions are unanswerable. How many hours are there in a mile? Is yellow square or round? Probably half the questions

we ask—half our great theological and metaphysical problems—are like that.”<sup>20</sup>

What Lewis meant, I think, is that our questions are often the wrong questions because they are based on such a small frame of reference. You and I aren’t smart enough to ask the right questions because we think in finite categories.

About six months after the heart attack, Dick was visiting Denny in the hospital. On a spur of the moment or a spur of the Spirit, he said, “Denny, do you remember this? ‘For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son’ . . . ” Dick stopped quoting midverse. Denny, who couldn’t remember a thing, got a faraway look in his eyes. Then he finished the sentence: “. . . that if I believe in him, I won’t die anymore.”<sup>21</sup> Dick could hardly believe his ears. He said, “Do you remember this?” and started singing, “Jesus loves me this I know for the Bible tells me so.”<sup>22</sup> Denny picked it up on key and sang it all the way to the end.

Dick started weeping in that hospital room as the Lord impressed upon him a simple yet profound truth: the spirit of man is deeper than the cortex of the brain. And even when the cortex of the brain is damaged, the Spirit of God can still commune with us. Perhaps that’s what the writer of Hebrews was saying: “Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow.”<sup>23</sup>

Nearly two decades later Dick was telling that story during a chapel service at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. At the end of the service, a young seminarian came running up to him. He said, “I’m an intern at a local church, and this past week I was sent to a nursing home to see a Mrs. Fredericks.” Mrs. Fredericks was well into her nineties, suffering from severe dementia. She would lie in her bed, facing the wall for hours on end and babbling nonsense syllables.

That’s how the seminarian found her when he went to visit her. No amount of conversation seemed to break into her consciousness, so the seminarian told her that he was going to leave after praying. That’s when Mrs. Fredericks rolled over and said, “Young man, before you go, I want to

say something.” She began to quote Psalm 119, the longest psalm in the Bible. He quickly turned to the psalm in his Bible to follow along. Mrs. Fredericks quoted all 176 verses, word for word. Then she rolled over and began babbling again.

I don’t fully understand why Denny suffered a heart attack in his twenties or why Mrs. Fredericks suffered dementia in her nineties, and we won’t sidestep the language of pain. It’s a difficult language to discern, but it’s a language Jesus knew by broken heart. We’ll double back to pain, but let me zero in on this: although we may never get to the bottom of the Bible, the Bible does get to the bottom of us. It penetrates the soul and spirit; it divides joints and marrow. And like a spiritual sonogram, it reveals the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.

The Word of God is longer than the longest memory and stronger than the strongest imagination. It’s also deeper than the cortex of the brain. But we must do what the psalmist himself did: “Thy word have I hid in mine heart, that I might not sin against thee.”<sup>24</sup>

## Reframe

In *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*,<sup>25</sup> there is a fantastic scene where a painting of a ship on the high seas literally comes to life. A very irksome boy named Eustace Scrubb is badgering his cousins Lucy and Edmund for their silly belief in a place called Narnia when the water from the painting starts flooding the room.

Instead of entering Narnia through a wardrobe, as they had done before, the children enter through the picture frame. It is their portal to a very different reality, a world called Narnia and a lion named Aslan. The picture frame reframes what is possible. The picture frame reframes who they are—boys and girls who become kings and queens.

The Bible is our picture frame. It redefines possibility: “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.”<sup>26</sup> It reframes reality: “No eye has seen, no ear has heard, and no mind has imagined what God has prepared for those who love him. But it was to us that God revealed these

things by his Spirit.”<sup>27</sup> And it reminds us of who we really are: “as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God.”<sup>28</sup>

I’m afraid that for some the Bible is like a painting that hangs on the wall. We occasionally give it a glance, but it’s nothing more than a pretty picture to look at. It’s as static as the status quo. Why? Because all we do is read it. We don’t *do* it. The Bible comes alive only when we actively obey it.

The Word of God is as powerful as the four words “Let there be light,”<sup>29</sup> which are still creating galaxies! The Word of God is as powerful as one word, *Ephphatha*, which is opening deaf ears and asthmatic lungs! The prophet Isaiah said that His Word does not return void.<sup>30</sup> The prophet Jeremiah said that God is watching over His Word to perform it.<sup>31</sup> So let’s not just read it; let’s stand on it. Better yet, let’s live it out.

The surest way to get into the presence of God is to get into the Word of God. It changes the way we think, the way we feel, the way we live, and the way we love.

“If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.”<sup>32</sup> Whatever you wish? Yes, whatever you wish. But here’s the catch: if the Word of God truly abides in you, you won’t want anything beyond the boundaries of God’s good, pleasing, and perfect will. And I’ll detail that idea when we talk about the language of desires. Suffice it to say, the Word of God sanctifies our desires until the will of God is all we want.

God is not a genie in a bottle, and our wish is not His command. Quite the opposite. As we grow in grace, His command becomes our only wish.

The word *abide* is repeated nine times in the King James Version of the fifteenth chapter of John. It’s a present imperative verb, which indicates continual action. And it’s one of those biblical words that has seventy faces. It means to “be moved”; it’s one way the Spirit of God stirs our spirits. It means “to stand still”; it’s planting our feet on the promises of God and refusing to back down or back off. It means “to stay overnight.” When was the last time you pulled an all-nighter in prayer, in worship, in the Word? And it means “to dwell.” God not only wants to take up residence within us; He wants to spend all eternity with us.

Hearing the voice of God starts with quickening. If you want to hear the still small voice of God, abiding is key. And the final key to hearing is doing. Hearing without doing is hearsay at best and hypocrisy at worst. We can and must do better than that.

### Lectio Divina

The mind produces a wide variety of brain waves, the most common being beta waves, which oscillate between fourteen and thirty cycles per second.<sup>33</sup> Beta waves are associated with normal waking consciousness, including anxious thoughts and active concentration. If we slow our minds down, we enter a state of relaxed alertness that produces alpha waves between eight and thirteen cycles per second. Those alpha waves are amplified by closed eyes, which might be a physiological argument for praying and meditating that way.<sup>34</sup>

The pace at which we read Scripture is not insignificant. Honestly, I tend to speed-read when I get to verses that cause conviction or confusion. But that's when I need to slow down and listen more carefully. Some truths are comprehended only via contemplation. You have to, quite literally, get on the right wavelength. When you feel like reading quickly, read slowly.

Reading the Bible for breadth is called *lectio continua*.

Reading the Bible for depth is called *lectio divina*.

Lectio divina is an ancient Benedictine practice, and it's one way to discern the voice of God. It involves four steps, or stages: reading, meditating, praying, and contemplating. Lectio divina has been likened to a meal, and I like that metaphor.

Reading is taking the first bite. Unfortunately, that's where most people stop. The second step, meditation, is chewing on words and phrases. Instead of dissecting the Word, we let the Word dissect us. The third step, prayer, is savoring the Word. When was the last time you read the Bible for pure enjoyment? It's prayer that turns discipline into desire; "have to" becomes "get to." And the fourth step, contemplation, is digesting the Word and absorbing its nutrients. That's how the Word gets from our head into our heart.

I wish that hearing the voice of God was as easy as reading, but it's not. It requires meditating, praying, and contemplating. Ironically, it's only as we slow ourselves down that the Holy Spirit quickens us. But there is one more piece to the puzzle.

“Christianity has not so much been tried and found wanting,” said G. K. Chesterton, “as it has been found difficult and left untried.”<sup>35</sup> You can't just read the Word, meditate on it, pray through it, and contemplate it. You have to *do* it. Until you obey it, you've simply been educated beyond the level of your obedience.

“I wonder what would happen,” said Peter Marshall, “if we all agreed to read one of the Gospels, until we came to a place that told us to do something, *then went out to do it*, and only after we had done it . . . began reading again?”<sup>36</sup> I'll tell you exactly what would happen: God's kingdom would come and His will would be done! That's what happens when hearers of the Word become doers of it.

Just do it.

Then see what God does!

all communication for two days. Get alone with God and His Word. And although prayer is an important part of a silent retreat, do more listening than talking.

Remember those voices that deafen us? It's hard to tune them out and turn them down, especially the voices in our heads. But the payoff is exponential: "Better is one day in [the Lord's] courts than a thousand elsewhere."<sup>30</sup> If we want to do more by doing less, we need to get into God's presence. It's our most efficient use of time, by a factor of a thousand. And quiet is the key. It's silence that helps us hear God's voice and sing His song.

Silence is the difference between sight and insight.

Silence is the difference between happiness and joy.

Silence is the difference between fear and faith.

According to interruption science, we're interrupted every three minutes.<sup>31</sup> And the very fact that we have a field of science dedicated to interruption is evidence of how bad it's gotten. To find peace and quiet, we need to set some boundaries. For example, no e-mail before nine o'clock in the morning or after nine at night. And while we're setting boundaries, we might want to delete a few apps, cancel some subscriptions, and take a break from social media every now and then.

A few years ago I wrote a book titled *The Circle Maker*.<sup>32</sup> It's about the power of prayer, and the thousands of testimonies I've heard since the book was released is evidence to that fact. Prayer is the difference between the best we can do and the best God can do. But there is something even more important and powerful than *talking* to God. What is it? *Listening* to God. It turns a monologue into a dialogue, which is exactly what He wants.

I have a simple rule of thumb when I meet with someone: do more listening than talking. The more I want to hear what the person has to say, the quieter I am. That's a good rule of thumb with God.

Lean into His whisper.

Then pray the bravest prayer!