

Listening to God through Scripture utilizing “passive listening”
(Rev. Dr. Vaughan Smith, revised 2/2018)

Lectio divina is the classical name for what I am calling “passive listening. For almost 2/3 of Christian history—from the cross until Guttenberg invented the printing press in about 1450—most Christians did not own their own Bibles, and methods of passive listening like the one described here were the primary way people fed on God’s Word.

Calhoun comments:

The first 1,500 years of church history were characterized by the practice of *lectio divina*. Since many people were illiterate and many that could read didn’t have Bibles, *lectio divina* offered a way of attending to Scripture as it was read in church, with an ear to hearing a word from God. Some brief and memorable word or phrase became bread for the soul throughout the week... It [*lectio divina*] exists to further divine companionship. *Lectio divina* invites us into God’s presence to listen for his particular, loving word *to me* at this particular moment in time. ¹

This ancient practice is a way we can love God by giving ourselves to God. As we do this passive listening, we sometimes receive God’s love in deep and personal ways, and as we do passive listening, God will sometimes communicate with us personally, either in words, or by giving us thoughts. Expect God to communicate with you as you do this passive listening; it will not happen every time, but it will happen some of the time.

The ancient practice of *passive listening* has 4 steps. ² It is sometimes possible to do all 4 steps in as little as 5 minutes, but it’s better to set aside 10-20 minutes.

Before beginning the 4 steps, I like to ask God to forgive my sins and to cleanse me of anything that would hinder me from experiencing God’s loving presence. I also ask God to speak to me *personally* through the Word and Spirit and to help me perceive His presence. After those prayers, I begin step 1.

In step 1, we read a small passage, usually 5 verses or so. Read those 5 or so verses out loud 3 to 5 times. Listen for what God is saying to you, *personally*. As you read those 5 verses 3 to 5 times, the Holy Spirit will often draw your attention to a word or phrase and that word or phrase will seem to stand out.

Sometimes we might not sense that the Holy Spirit is causing a word or phrase to stand out. **If after reading the same 5 verses 3 to 5 times, the Holy Spirit does not seem to be pointing us to a particular word or phrase, then we simply select a word or phrase ourselves.**

Once we have a word or phrase selected, we set our Bibles down, and we move on to step 2. **In step 2, we focus on that particular word or phrase that was selected either by us or by the Holy Spirit. Repeat your word or phrase, over and over, *slowly*—like 2 or 3 times a minute.**

¹ Adele A. Calhoun. *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook*, 168.

² This description of how to *lectio divina* draws heavily upon M. Basil Pennington, *Lectio Divina: Renewing the Ancient Practice of Praying the Scriptures* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1998).

Listen with your whole self for what God is saying to you personally. Do not analyze it. Just listen to it. *This is not a time to think about the passage. This is a time to listen, a time to let God communicate with us personally through the Word and Spirit.* As we listen, ideas or feelings will often come to us. Some of these ideas or feelings are direct communications from God.³

After we have “heard” or experienced God, we move to **step 3, which is prayer.** We **simply speak to God about what God has said, or shown or done in our time of listening.** If you received or heard nothing, then talk with God about *that*.

After a brief prayer, we come to step 4. **In step 4, we simply sit quietly with God for a few minutes. This is not a time to speak to God; just be still and quiet.** Sometimes, it feels like we are sitting all alone. But sometimes, this sitting quietly with God is a powerful experience of enjoying God’s loving presence.

These 4 steps can be fluid; they often flow back and forth.

In your time of passive listening, try to speak little. Listen much, and be silently present to God, who is always present with you.

After our time of passive listening is finished, as we go about the day, when we find a moment that does not demand our full attention (standing in line, walking, etc.) we can turn our minds to the word or phrase from our time with God. And as we return throughout the day to our word or phrase, we re-open ourselves to God; we sometimes receive new insights; our spirits are fed, and over time, we develop a closer relationship with God.

This prayerful way of reading God’s Word can be done with any passage from the Bible. Many people especially like to do this kind of reading in the four Gospels and the Psalms. To learn and become comfortable with this prayerful way of reading, I suggest beginning with the following passages:

1. Ephesians 2.1-5
2. Ephesians 2.8-10
3. Ephesians 3.16-19
4. Isaiah 55.8-11
5. Proverbs 3.5-6
6. Galatians 2.20
7. Mark 8.34-36
8. Psalm 23

This passive listening is much easier *to do* than *to explain*. The best way to learn it is by doing it.

³ Whenever we think we have received a *personal* communication from God, we need to test that communication by comparing it with what God clearly says in his written Word. If we think we heard God saying something to us personally, but the thing we heard contradicts Scripture, then either we heard wrong, or it was not God we were hearing. It is also good to discuss what we think we hear with other mature believers.