Chapter 6
God Talks to His Friends

Prayer is simply talking to God. He speaks to us: we listen.
We speak to him: he listens. A two-way process:
speaking and listening.[1]
—Mother Teresa

Friends of God

They call us arrogant. They call us fools. They call us deluded. Some people think it's presumptuous to believe that almighty God would speak to us. Dallas Willard quotes actress Lily Tomlin, summing up the problem: "Why is it that when we speak to God we are said to be praying but when God speaks to us we are said to be schizophrenic?"[2]

And yet speaking to his people is precisely what God does. The Bible tell us that God speaks; church history tells us that God speaks and I'll bet that to some degree you know it to be true in your own life. If God is all-powerful and all knowing, then he certainly knows how each of our "tomorrows" is going to unfold. Is it really so presumptuous to think that God would talk to his friends and family?

"You are my friends if you do what I command," said Jesus. "I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you" (John 15:14-15). Jesus has chosen to give us inside information—to let us in on what he is doing and planning.

God talks to his friends, and it is this idea of friendship that is vital to grasp. When friends talk, it is a lot more than one friend telling another what to do. Communication between friends is about connection, being together, being of the same heart and mind.

When God gives me a tip on something unusual that's coming the next day, or when he gives me a revelatory word that shows me how to pray for one of my friends, it gives me *confidence.* Not confidence in my abilities, but an assurance that he is with me, helping me every step of the way.

The Love of a Family

The imagery in the Bible that describes our relationship with God is very diverse; He calls us co-laborers, servants, heirs, children and friends. Many of these metaphors are familial relationships: parent-child, sheep-shepherd and husband-wife. In all of those relationships, there is ongoing dialogue, the kind that nurtures and strengthens the relationship.

Put another way, what kind of marriage would *exclude* intimate conversation? The answer would be, only a really bad one. If the cords of conversation are cut between Linda and me, it doesn't take long before we're in conflict. If our responsibilities eclipse our friendship, we wander down parallel but separate roads and find ourselves in different worlds. But if we take time to talk, we stoke the fire of our mutual love and commitment to one another. Family members talk to each other. Fact.

And while we are on the subject, what kind of parent-child relationship would *exclude* communication? That would be obvious, only a heart-breaking one. There is a direct correlation between broken homes and broken communication. When a father and son never talk, how can love be given, how can trust be engendered? Without two-way conversations, a loving attachment can't be built and nurtured.

The gospel of the New Testament models intimate conversation with a loving Father. We see Jesus listening to his Father all the time for what to say and do. Though God is called "gracious and compassionate" throughout the Old Testament, Jesus is the first to address him with the personal language of "Abba," a term of endearment that was used in Jesus' time to address one's earthly father.

Eugene Peterson's description of the resurrection life in Romans 8 of *The Message* is especially touching: "It's adventurously expectant, greeting God with a childlike 'What's next, Papa?' God's Spirit touches our spirits and confirms who we really are. We know who he is, and we know who we are: Father and children" (Rom 8:15 *The Message*).

Studies on child development show that children need consistent one-on-one contact with their parents for healthy emotional and mental development. Children thrive on attention. They need to regularly hear their parents say, "I love you." They need to feel affirmed by a listening, responsive parent. Without this kind of loving care, children feel insecure. In the absence of a nurturing parental presence, they aren't happy and don't play well with their siblings or other kids.

Just as kids blossom under the constant affirmation of parents, so we as God's children thrive on personal contact with our loving heavenly Father. Without our Father's assuring words we don't know who we are or how we fit in our Father's world. Paul echoes this with a clarion call to experiencing God's love. He prays that his churches would experience this same union with Christ, this same personal knowledge of God's powerful love:

> I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ … (Eph 3:16-18).

Jackie Pullinger, a lifelong missionary to Hong Kong, has been a great inspiration to me. I recently heard her share a story[3] of how her personal prayer times often go. She uses the Lord's Prayer, beginning with "My Father" and saying to him "Lord, you are so wonderful, so beautiful," as she meditates on the Lord's goodness. Then the Father says to her "You are so wonderful … you are so beautiful." This goes on for a long time, back and forth, each one speaking to the other about how special and beloved and precious they are.

After awhile, Jackie asks, "Can we talk about work now?" The Father says "no." He wants her just to listen to Him say how special she is—just to sit and wait. So she continues praising the Father and resting in His love, and then after another several minutes, she asks again, "Can we talk about work now?" And He replies "Not now." After some time she asks again, "Will we ever talk about work?" And He replies "Maybe not." Very often He will say "maybe not." It's not that he doesn't care about what's happening with the work of helping people, it's just that He wants her to continually be filled up with a fresh dose of his revealed, personal love.

Jackie's life is all about helping people in need. For forty-plus years she has lived in Hong Kong, helping the poorest of the poor. The Father has a priority of helping her take a breather from serving others to shower his love on her.

Jesus said that he and the father would *make their home* with those who love and obey him (John 14:23) and that his Father would reveal himself to each one of us (John 14:21). What a picture of warmth and intimacy. Home is where we know unconditional love and acceptance, it's where we can completely relax and be ourselves, a place to talk about anything and everything. In my home, I talk to my kids all the time. Surely our Father wants to talk to his children!

With my teenagers I talk about the things they're doing—their music, what's up in school, the sports they love. I'm interested in what my kids are doing because I love them. My conversations with them aren't limited to commands or instructions. What a sour relationship it would be if all I ever said was "take out the garbage." Just being with my kids, and having a good time laughing and playing games, is sometimes the best medicine for the soul. My presence with them communicates love and mutual enjoyment and this helps build a foundation for all the challenges and conflicts of family life.

Hanging out with toddlers is something I really miss. When my son Ian was three years old, he wanted to be with me no matter where I was or what I was doing. He would come running into my office, jump on my lap and say, "show me some pictures!" (His own birthday pictures got the biggest response.) When I was gardening, he insisted on having his own shovel to dig alongside me. If I was going on an errand, he was thrilled to come along. He was enthusiastic about doing what I was doing, just because he got to be *with me.* Along the way, we talked.

When I put my kids to bed, I kiss them, pray for them, and tell them I love them. If I know how to do this for my kids, surely our Heavenly Father desires to speak his words of comfort to us.

It's mind-boggling to think that God could speak millions of different messages to millions of different people, all at the same time. But scripture reveals him as the all-seeing, all-knowing, self-revealing God. We see many God-encounters with people all through the Bible, and as "a kingdom of priests" we are all eligible for these divine breakthroughs. We don't earn the right; God gives it to us freely.

Dallas Willard describes our interaction with God as a "freely cooperative relationship between mature people who love each other with the richness of *agape* love."[4] While the fruit of our union and conversation with God is good works, it isn't the only topic of conversation. Our Father is interested in our well-being, and he has purposed from eternity past to lavish his love on us. So he finds lots of ways to communicate his love, not just his commandments.

Examples from the Bible and Church History

Encounters between God and his people are common throughout the Bible and in church history. Abraham, Moses, Paul and Peter all had mystical experiences with God. Paul considered revelatory experiences to be a part of normal Christian life.

Beyond the Bible it is possible to see a pattern that emerges as you read the stories of the most influential leaders and writers in church history. Most of them had profound experiences of God that launched their journey of faith. The lives of George Fox and John Wesley make clear that tangible communication with God is commonplace.

George Fox lived from 1624 to 1691 in England. He was raised in the Church of England but his spiritual thirst was never satisfied within that tradition. He founded "the Religious Society of Friends," better known as the Friends or the Quakers. Fox is known for emphasizing every Christian's direct experience with God. He describes the indwelling Holy Spirit as the "light of Christ within" and "Christ as inward Teacher."

The obvious scriptural basis for Fox's teaching is Jesus' parting words to his disciples: "But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you" (John 14:26).

Because Fox taught people to be directly dependent on the Lord Himself—and less tied to church authorities—his message was vehemently resisted by the Church of England. For most of his life his teaching was banned by the state church. He was beaten, stoned and tortured for his views of Christian spirituality.

Fox's model for hearing from God is finely balanced with respect for the authority of Scripture. While he is known for promoting the believer's direct experience of God's

living presence, he did not elevate experience above scripture. The first four of his "Seven Elements in Our Life with God" are summarized as follows:

1. Every true Christian has direct, immediate experiences of Jesus.
2. These experiences are best understood by relating them to evidences from Scripture.
3. These experiences not only confirm current leadings but also provide new insights as we move through life.
4. Scripture teaches us how to relate our experiences of the historical Jesus with the leadings of the inward Christ.[5]

Soon after George Fox's period of prominence, another towering figure in church history came onto the scene: John Wesley (1703-1791). Wesley was the founder of the Methodist Church movement and a pioneer in starting churches throughout the United Kingdom emphasizing discipleship and personal accountability.

Like Fox, Wesley was a faithful Anglican, but became deeply agitated when he realized that thinking rightly about God wasn't enough. Hungry for assurance of his salvation he began a long period of diligent praying and searching for God. After a long period of prayer he was forever transformed by an encounter with God at a meeting of Moravians in the south of London.

Up until that time he adhered to "three-point Anglicanism," which recognized the primary authority of Scripture with the secondary authorities of reason and tradition. After his life-changing encounter with God he included "experiencing God" as a fourth primary point in following Jesus. It was a message that remains just as relevant today:

"Wesley states that heart religion is confirmed by direct, immediate, inward experiences of God. Just as we know physical reality because of our natural senses, we know spiritual reality by our supernatural senses,"[6]

Wesley was not unaware of emotionalism in certain sectors of Christianity. His healthy respect for scripture kept him from over-emphasizing the personal, direct experience of God as he had witnessed both in England and on the East coast of the United States. "Wesley realized that 'experience' did not contradict Scripture but served to organize, illuminate and apply the truth of it to our life."[7]

The stories of George Fox and John Wesley highlight the importance of the many biblical examples of people encountering God. They remind us that knowing God is more than adherence to a body of truth. Engaging with God touches the deepest part of our souls. It is helpful to trace God's consistent self-revelation throughout history, lest we think that God-encounters are reserved only for Bible times, or limited to modern day Charismatic church movements. God's visitation is commonplace throughout every era.

The evidence of scripture and history is clear: we all have access to God and every one of his children can hear his voice. On the other hand, as I look at history I see some well-

known preachers and saints who had amazing and extraordinary God-encounters. Most of us won't receive appearances of the crucified Christ experienced by such people as St. Francis of Assisi or Julian of Norwich. Saints and preachers such as St. Francis are a gift to the church in all generations. Their extraordinary encounters with God point the way for us towards intimacy with Jesus during this life and make us long for the bliss of heaven.

Seeing the God Who Sees Us

One of my favorite Bible stories that demonstrate God's desire to communicate his loving concern and awareness of our circumstances is the story of the Egyptian woman, Hagar (Gen 16:4-14). Hagar is the servant to Abram's wife, Sarai. When Sarai cannot conceive a child, she suggests that Abram sleep with Hagar to produce the child that God had promised to give. But when she becomes pregnant, Hagar despises Sarai. Sarai reacts angrily, treating Hagar harshly. Then Hagar runs away into the desert to escape Sarai's abuse. The angel of the Lord appears to Hagar and begins by correcting her: " … Return to your mistress and submit to her authority" (Gen 16:9 NLT).

The angel hasn't come only to rebuke, but to encourage. He promises that Hagar will have " … more descendants than you can count," saying " … the LORD has heard your cry of distress" (Gen 16:10-11). In God's compassion, he saw the pain and predicament of this Egyptian slave woman, and came to speak to her, guide her, and rescue her. Though she had acted disrespectfully towards her mistress, God forgave and blessed her.

Before that God-encounter, Hagar likely saw God as distant and unconcerned. She was a foreigner, and not part of the chosen line of Abram. But after that experience with God, Hagar referred to the Lord, who had *spoken to her*, as " … the God who *sees me*," for she said, " … *I have seen the One who sees me*!" (Gen 16:13 NLT, emphasis added).

For me this is a profound story that illustrates what it's like to *see the Lord.* I *know* He sees me. It's like a child who has lost her way wandering in the desert, and her father comes looking for her. The child is frantic with fear, but when she sees her Daddy coming to her rescue, and looks into his eyes, she *sees the one who sees her* and everything changes.

When God sees us in our time of need, and takes initiative to speak and make a promise to us, we never see him the same again. From that time on, we see him as present, aware and ready to communicate with us. Like Hagar in her time of need, we think of God as *"the One* who *sees us."*

Hagar's dramatic encounter with the angel of the Lord isn't comparable to my daily experience. On occasion I've had very powerful encounters with God, accompanied by various physical phenomena, but mostly I hear him speaking in a " … gentle whisper" (1

Kgs 19:12). Like a butterfly that flutters into view and is gone in a few seconds, his whisperings are usually brief and gentle.

The Various Ways God Speaks to Us

Of course the scriptures are a primary source and the most reliable means of God speaking to us. We can read a scripture and it hits us like a ton of bricks, but at times God speaks through pictures in the mind's eye. With me these are usually faint images; seldom are they vivid and in "Technicolor." To another person He speaks through intense feelings followed by a flood of ideas that tumble out of the heart and into a journal. Other people "hear" a word or phrase or idea go through their mind, but it's not an audible hearing—it's more of a knowing.

The thing to remember is that God is infinite; He speaks to people in diverse ways. I won't attempt to give an exhaustive list. Some people have very little emotion attached to hearing from God, while others gush with tears. Some people dream dreams, others see visions (Acts 2:17) and others have a simple but profound sense of knowing truth from God.

God can speak to us through a movie or a novel or a formation of clouds in the sky. A few years ago at the national Canadian Vineyard conference in Manitoba, someone in the meeting gave a word about "God's hand being on us." At that very same moment, Rik Berry, a pastor and gifted artist, was on the platform and had just finished painting a prophetic picture of God's hand upon us. Then someone said, "Look up in the sky!" Rik came out from under the band shell overhang to see a cloud formation in the shape of a hand with distinct fingers. The cloud was right over our outdoor meeting place, confirming the prophetic words through a natural phenomenon.

The Difference it Makes

Previous to my awakening to God as a teenager, I had a vague knowledge of God as "up there somewhere." Then he turned the lights on. Before, his written words were only an abstract idea. Then they became living words, daily bread for my soul. He kept on speaking to me, sometimes with surprising clarity. Sometimes I'm frustrated because I can't hear him more clearly. But he is God and I am not; he chooses when to speak.

In the seasons of silence there are many memories of revelation from my past that instill confidence. Like monuments dotting the path I've walked, God's words and fulfilled promises bolster my confidence for today's journey. My response to God's whisperings is deep thankfulness. Constant contact with my Father makes me secure and steady. I'm able to fight off demons of discouragement because my Father is present and speaking. Though I make mistakes, he comes to me as he did to Hagar, with correction, guidance and blessing. He keeps reminding me—*I will be with you.*

This is the never-ending cycle of worship, revelation, more worship and more revelation. The more we see, the more we worship, and the more we worship, the more we see.

He Speaks Before we Ask

I'm amazed that God will sometimes take the first step, speaking to me before I call on him. This communicates that he "sees me" and is ready and able to rescue me from myriad problems, bolstering my faith for the present day.

Occasionally, just as I'm about to fall asleep, God gives me an impression such as: "It's going to be a really good day" … or "get ready for a surprise." It's like a quick idea flashing in my head, like an exclamation point appearing in the air for a brief moment, and then it's gone. In those bedtime moments when God whispers, I'm often not praying. God takes the initiative. As I'm dozing off and my brain is going into "suspend mode," I'm startled by a clear thought. The words sound like my own thoughts, yet I know that they're coming from outside of me.

When I get these nudges from God, inevitably something extraordinary happens the next day—I get a phone call from a close friend I haven't heard from for ages, I have a conversation with a co-worker that is a key turning point, I receive an unexpected check in the mail, or I'm really happy because it's a beautiful sunny day—that might sound trite but it can be huge if you live in Vancouver and you've had twenty or thirty straight days of cloud and rain!

These words often come at the end of a tough day. God's gift of communication at that time lets me know two things—he sees the struggles of the present day and he has something good planned for tomorrow. In the heat of the battle, God says *I will be with you.* His words bring comfort, strength, and encouragement.

Let's get back to that first question: why would he speak to us like this? Why would he go to the trouble of saying something so specific, yet so simple? The answer is clear; he loves us and he wants us to know *he is with us*. He wants us to know that he knows everything that *is happening* and *is going to happen* in our lives. He doesn't miss a thing. His promise that we'll never be separated from his love isn't just theory, it's a reality. "neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God … (Rom 8:39). Our Father finds creative ways to communicate his abiding presence.

I Will Be With You

Over and over again in the Bible God tells his people "I will be with you." To Isaac, God said, " … I am the God of your father Abraham. Do not be afraid, for *I am with you ... "* (Gen 26:24, emphasis added). To Moses, who was desperate for a guarantee of God's presence and favor after the golden calf incident, God said " … I will personally

go with you, Moses, and I will give you rest—everything will be fine for you" (Ex 33:14 NLT, emphasis added).

To Joshua, who had some awfully big shoes to fill after Moses passed away, God said, "So be strong and courageous! Do not be afraid and do not panic before them. For the LORD your God will personally go ahead of you. *He will neither fail you nor abandon you"* (Deut 31:6 NLT, emphasis added). The list goes on, because more than anything else we need to know that God is with us. When he speaks to us, revealing that he sees our personal needs at specific moments in time, we're comforted and strengthened.

Sometimes all we need is to know that God is with us. Sometimes all we need is to be reminded of the fact that we are a child—and a friend—of God.

Can you picture Jesus walking into the room right now, smiling as he sees you, and reaching out to embrace you? Can you imagine what it would be like for him to look right into your eyes, giving you his full attention? Can you feel his genuine concern and love for you?

Jesus would listen intently to your every word, picking up every nuance, gesture, and emotion. He would completely understand what you're going through. And then he would respond to you, telling you just what you need to hear. You would feel safe and secure in his love and you would know that *he is with you*.

Can you image anything more precious?

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1. Teresa, *Everything Starts from Prayer,* 35.
2. Dallas Willard, *Hearing God, Developing a Conversational Relationship with God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press,1983), 19.
3. Jackie Pullinger, "Personal Communication," Watershed Café in Langley, Canada
4. Willard, *Hearing God*, 31.
5. Gary Beebe, *Longing for God, Seven Paths of Christian Devotion* ((Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 177.
6. Ibid., 185.
7. Ibid., 184.