

STAY AWAKE

LECTIO DIVINA

Lectio Divina

Listening to God

Reading the Bible and praying the Bible are two very different undertakings. To pray the Bible is to apply listening and silence to the Word of God in order to hear God speak. This prayer method known as *lectio divina*, “divine reading” or the sacred reading of scripture, is being practiced by more and more young people and youth groups as they seek to listen to God.

It All Started with Saint Benedict

Sometime after 500 C.E. an Italian we now know as Saint Benedict gathered a group of ordinary people into a community, which would be called a monastery. . . . To guide his community, Benedict wrote a rule, a set of guidelines for the common life and spiritual practice of the members. The purpose of the *Rule* was to help create a “school for the service of the Lord,” a place where people could come and learn how to be with Jesus.

One of the three primary tools of this school was reading; the other two were liturgical prayer and work. Yet this was not the kind of reading we know today. Rather, Benedict prescribed *lectio divina*, sacred reading, a prayer practice designed to cultivate contemplative listening. For it was through such listening that the monks could become aware of the presence of the Holy Spirit in their hearts and minds.

This process of reading takes seriously the notion that the Bible is the living Word of God. Through the Bible, God can actually speak to the reader directly, now, in real time. What is required in order to hear God’s voice is a practice that teaches the believer how to “incline the ear of your heart.” In order to do this Benedict wanted the monks to ruminate on—literally to “chew” or “digest”—the Word of God, much as a cow would chew its cud. This practice became a staple of monastic life for fifteen hundred years and is handed to us as a gift from the distant past.

The Practice of *Lectio Divina*

Lectio divina, as a formal prayer practice, consists of four steps or phases. These steps are not mechanical activities you must perform correctly in a certain order to “get it right.” Sacred reading is a living conversation between you and God. In the same way that conversation with another person has rhythms, ebbs, and flows, so too does sacred reading. A rich, lively conversation encompasses times of listening and times of responding, times of speech and times of silence.



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Use the following outline in your personal quiet time to practice listening to God.

Individual *Lectio Divina*

PHASE 1, *Lectio* (reading/listening)

- Choose a passage of scripture. Although any passage will do, a psalm, a story about Jesus, or one of the poetic passages from a prophet works very well. For example, try Mark 1:14-20 or Isaiah 40:1-5.
- Read the passage to yourself twice. Don't be caught by the literal meaning of the scripture. Rather, listen for the word or phrase that catches your attention.
- Silently focus on that word or phrase. Repeat it a few times. Allow it to sift through your heart and mind.

PHASE 2, *Meditatio* (pondering)

- As you continue to focus on your word or phrase, pay attention to the thoughts and feelings it evokes.
- What images, what thoughts, what memories come to mind?
- Continue to ask God to speak to you through this word, and listen for the reply.

PHASE 3, *Oratio* (responding)

- At some point you may find yourself wanting to reply to God. What desires has your prayer awakened in you?
- Maybe you have found an area of your life that needs some work.
- Maybe you are grateful for something and you wish to express that gratitude.
- Maybe you feel called to a new course of action in your life.
- Whatever you sense, do not rush the prayer. Continue to wait and listen as God forms your prayer and desire in your heart. Speak your prayer of desire, longing, or action to God. Continue to listen in the silence.

PHASE 4, *Contemplatio* (resting)

- In this final phase of the prayer, the conversation with God draws to a close. Having heard a word from God and having expressed your response to that word, you now allow yourself to rest in the silence.
- Allow your mind to settle.
- When you feel that the prayer has come to an end, express your gratitude to God. This can be as simple as saying "Thank you" or "Amen."

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If you would prefer to listen to the scripture being read, try [Audio Lectio](#) online.

If you want to try this prayer practice with a group of friends or with your youth group, use the outline for “LECTIO in a Group” on pages 176–177 of *Creating a Life with God*. (To order, call 1-800-972-0433 or visit www.upperroom.org/bookstore)

Dig Deeper

What if your prayer doesn't follow the outline? What if you hear nothing at all? You might feel frustrated and angry because all you thought about during your prayer time was being at the mall or blowing the big game or something else seemingly unrelated to God. In a society that places ultimate value on “getting things done,” the experience of “nothing happening” can be maddening. Yet, from Benedict's perspective, such “failure” is a normal part of our fallen human condition. If encountering God's Word were easy, there would be no need to practice prayer!

Prayer is not a product; it is a relationship. Even if you did not experience the wonderful event you imagined, God knows your intention. You wanted to spend time with Jesus, and in some way, you did. So express your frustration to God; ask for help and for the strength to try again. God does not require that we be successful, just faithful.

STAY AWAKE LECTIO DIVINA

THE ART OF
LISTENING

WEEKEND!

ENUMA OKORO

BENEDICT OF NURSIA: LISTENING WITH THE HEART

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The sixth century monk, Benedict of Nursia, started a community for believers who wanted to seek and serve God through the daily practical habits of work, prayer, rest, and spiritual learning. One key rule that Benedict had for new community members was to try to listen for God in a deeper and perhaps more challenging way than they had before.

Enuma Okoro is a writer, speaker, and communications consultant. www.enumaokoro.com



www.devozine.org

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THE ART OF LISTENING

WEEKEND!



"Listen carefully, my son, to the master's instructions, and attend to them with the ear of your heart. This is advice from a father who loves you: welcome it, and faithfully put it into practice" (*The Rule of Saint Benedict*). Benedict believed that in order to serve God faithfully, Christians had to listen with their hearts as well as with their ears.

Usually, we are advised to listen to our heart, to live in ways that ring true with whatever we feel in our heart, to do whatever our heart tells us. Yes, we should pay attention to how we feel, but more important than what our

heart feels is what God speaks into our hearts and our lives. The Bible tells us that our hearts are deceptive (Ephesians 4:17-24). Often we imagine that our heart can tell us what is best for us, but God tells us what is best for us. God knows us better than we know ourselves. Sometimes, the things our heart desires can turn our focus away from God's call to love and respect creation and ourselves, people made in God's image. What would it mean if instead of listening to our heart, we listened with our heart?

Hearing and acting on what we hear are completely different

experiences. When Benedict encouraged his community to listen for God, he was also calling them to live lives of obedience. Did you know that the word obey comes in part from the Latin word meaning "to hear?" When we obey God, we are not simply hearing; we are listening and acting on what we have heard.

How do we listen with our heart? It takes practice, but the basic steps are to read scripture, to find times when we can be quiet in God's presence, and to learn to pay better attention to the world around us. God is always speaking into our lives. <

NEXT DAY STRETCH

One way Benedict teaches us to listen with the ears of our heart is through *lectio divina*, the practice of reading and listening to scripture to hear whatever the Holy Spirit may want to tell us.

1. Find a quiet place where you feel at peace and where you will not be disturbed.
2. Read carefully the following Bible passage: John 1:35-39.
3. Stop, close your eyes, and pray that God will show you what you need to hear in these verses.
4. Read the passage a second time. Notice the words or phrases that jump out at you; write them down.
5. Write down your thoughts and feelings about the passage and about the words and phrases that caught your attention.
6. Read what you have written. Can you create a prayer in response to what you have heard God saying through scripture?

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