

Listening to the Holy Spirit

John 14:16-17 – And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever—the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you.

John 16: 13 – when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth.

John 14:26 – the Advocate, 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.

Every Christian, who has accepted Jesus, has received the Holy Spirit. God starts, through the Holy Spirit in us, a relationship with us. We can really experience that.

But how does that work?

Different ways

There's no one way that's the same for everyone. Just as every human relationship is unique, so is every relationship between God and a human unique.

That's because God has created all humans differently.

But He promises to be with us through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, so we don't have to be afraid, that we will not be able to experience a relationship with God.

God is not hindered by our limitations, He finds ways to reach us. We may believe and trust that.

Ways in which God reaches us can be:

- In our thoughts, in our soul
- When we read the Bible
- When we pray
- In nature
- In experiencing peace and quiet
- In our interaction with others
- During the church service or house group
- When we sing songs of praise
- In a knowing, a being secure, in our soul
- Through situations
- Through inspiration

- In dreams and visions

These are definitely not the only possible ways. God is creative and is able to reach everyone.

Faith

In our life now, we may grow in faith. That means that we can't see the Triune God with our earthly eyes yet, but in the course of our life we get more and more convinced of His existence. Of Who He is and of His relationship with us. We get to know Him, while we can't see Him literally.

That also means, that we usually have to gain experience in listening to the Holy Spirit, to be able, little by little, to better discern how and when He speaks to us.

Sometimes God changes the way He speaks to us in the course of our life, but often He does it constantly in the same way, so that you can recognise it. Important is, that you're open to discovering how God interacts with you specifically, and don't have a preconceived idea of how it should be (for example because you heard that from other Christians).

By responding to the guidance of the Holy Spirit; obeying and following Him every time you get the impression God has spoken to you, your discernment gets better. Don't worry if you make mistakes in this; you learn as you go along.

Experiencing the Holy Spirit

Examples of what you can experience from the Holy Spirit:

- The right Bible texts come suddenly to your mind, when you're in a certain situation and it makes you calm and helps you to know what to do.
- You understand a Bible part that you read and suddenly see the clear application to yourself and your life. You feel built up, inspired and cared for, touched or calm.
- You get an inspiration and follow it and it turns out to be exactly the right thing.
- You have a problem and suddenly there's help from unexpected places, for example from someone who really didn't know anything about your problem.
- You're thinking about something and the answer comes to you when you open a magazine and an article catches your eye.

- You're in nature and experience peace, quiet, inspiration, hope, joy or strength.
- You experience that there's a loving Person with you, Who really knows you.
- It's like someone has put his arms around you.
- You pray and ask God a question and the answer comes to mind.
- You pray and ask God a question and you don't hear anything, but then experience the answer in your life.
- You notice that the situation in your life is somehow led and you experience that it's good.
- You've done something and others come to tell you that they've experienced God in it, or it turns out in another way that what you did was inspired by the Holy Spirit.

These are just a few examples of course. There are so many other ways in which you can experience contact with God.

Someone else speaks

Besides the Holy Spirit Who speaks to us, others speak to us too. Other people, our own thoughts, the world or the devil. How can you learn to discern if something's your own thought or the guidance of God? If something's God's idea or is coming from the world? If that what other people say to you is really from God or is in fact their own fantasy? If something is inspiration from the Holy Spirit or from the devil?

Every one of us has to learn this. It usually takes time and experience and it can go wrong. That's ok. The Bible teaches us that it's better to make mistakes and learn from it, than to do nothing because you're afraid to do it wrong.

There are a few principles that you can apply and that will help you to discern better who's speaking.

Learning to discern:

1. It starts with taking time for God. Don't just talk during your prayer, but also take time to listen. Ask during the day for His guidance. Be still for God before you make a decision. Focus on God when you're in nature. Sing for Him.
2. Often read in the Bible, because that's how you get to know God and how your discernment will increase. Be receptive when you read and presume that the Holy Spirit will speak to you.

3. Get to know yourself well; what are your weaknesses, hurts, pet topics and desires? The better you get to know yourself, the sooner you can discern if insights and thoughts are possibly from yourself.
4. When you think you experience the guidance of the Holy Spirit, obey when you're convinced that the assignment is Biblical. This experience will let your discernment grow, even if it turns out you were wrong.
5. Although God can use other people and situations to speak to you, you will always stay responsible to discern if something's really from God. Others cannot take this over from you and should not put too much pressure on you with their ideas.
6. Get to know the attack techniques of the devil; he is the prosecutor who tries to let you feel guilty all the time. He is full of criticism. He brings anxiety, worrying, panic and fear. He twists the truth, for example into legalism ("you have to do this, otherwise you don't belong to God"), or selfishness("you're entitled to this"), or desperation ("You'll never overcome this"). He lets emotions flare up high and tries to let you act in a whim. He tries to mislead you and to let yourself go, through your weaknesses and sin.
7. Realise that you're imperfect in discerning, so that you can be corrected. Sometimes people are so convinced that they can always discern God's voice, that they're not open anymore to the idea that they might be wrong sometimes. Only God is perfect.
8. Take the time for big decisions. Discuss them with other stable Christians.
9. Write down your experiences in your relationship with God. This can strengthen your faith when you read it back and can also help you to see better how God interacts with you. Write also how you feel when you think God is speaking to you. Do you experience peace and quiet? Or passion for action? And how did you feel in times that (as it showed afterwards) God didn't speak to you, but you, other people, the world or the devil? In that way you can learn to recognise patterns.

Listening to God's voice together

Besides our individual relationship with God, we, as family, church and denomination have a collective relationship with God. How do you discern the guidance of the Holy Spirit as a family or church? For example when you have to make decisions together?

Here are a few tips that can help you with this:

1. It starts with everyone's personal discernment of the guidance of the Holy Spirit, in everyone's own life. Do you live your life in dependence of the guidance of the Holy Spirit? Do you recognise God's voice?
2. Try to form the team that will make the decision in the church, from people who have this discernment. Address everyone in your family: "How do you think we can do the will of God in the best way?" Or: "Shall we all pray about it ourselves and then discuss it with each other?"
3. Look with attention at the decision to be made. What is it really about? What spiritual issue is it about, what lies behind it? For example: when you search for a new building as church, the question behind it is: "What is our mission and calling for this church?"
4. As a group be dedicated in: reliability in relationships, confidentiality, honesty and willingness to admit own mistakes and weaknesses.
5. Accept it when a team member has a serious resistance against a certain decision, unity is more important than fast decisions.
6. During the conversation take the time for silent prayer several times, so that everyone can calm down and tune to God.
7. Pray especially for a certain kind of "indifference", namely that everyone can set aside his own desires and ideas and is only interested in getting to know God's will. After the prayer, ask how many persons have reached that stage.
8. Take extensive time to listen to each other concerning experiences, Bible parts, the facts of the situation, the reason why this conversation is necessary, insights and inspirations of everyone.
9. In the end, when you have reached an agreement, choose this as the possible guidance of the Holy Spirit. Choose the option that gives everyone the impression of being closer to God.
10. Later on, come together to discuss how the decision has worked out, and if it indeed has seemed to be the right one.

Questions:

1. How do you experience the presence of the Holy Spirit?
2. How do you feel about God maintaining a relationship with everyone in a different way?

3. Do you have an understanding of the difference between your own thoughts, the opinion of people, the world or the devil, versus the voice of God? How does it work with you?
4. How could you make better decisions together in the church on the basis of the guidance of the Holy Spirit? How does it work now? Could you make some improvements?

Assignment:

Keep a notebook about your experiences with God's voice and the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The next time take your book with you. Maybe we can share our experiences with each other.