



A unit on the Spirit of Prophecy

Ellen White: The Journey of Faith

Module III

“Listening to God”



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1. Introduction

We live in a world full of noise. Almost everywhere we go, we find sounds competing with our minds, keeping us from letting thoughts getting below the surface level. On the other hand, we share our thoughts, comments, views and beliefs on the electronic waves of social networks. Like a soaking sponge, we listen to everything and everyone fashioning our thoughts in the image of a destructive monster, the quick fix push-button information overload.

Often, the quick-fix mentality demands the presence of a quick-fix God or an Intruder-God who provides the in-and-out or switch-on switch-off service. Amidst the surrounding clouds of technological inventions, how often do we stop to listen to the small still voice? In this strange and fabricated world of Ipods and many other gadgets are we listening to the still small voice of God's Spirit?

Listening, or as Guenther suggests, "holy listening", requires "presence and attentiveness".¹ In contrast to the rate-race of our time, God is not apart from this world. He is the ever-present "Emmanuel-God with us" in every circumstance of life.² Here Jesus offers His presence and attentiveness to fill our hunger for wholeness and hunger to discover our value and potential as children of God.

This module explores the dynamics of listening to God's presence and attentiveness as experienced by Ellen White.





2. God Communicates

God communicates but do we really listen and what do we hear him say? "In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many and in various ways, but in the last days he has spoken to us through His Son..." (Hebrews 1:1,2). God communicates His presence and reassuring attentiveness. The literal translation of Genesis 1:1, in the beginning created God...", introduces a picture of a relational God. It seems that God puts the notion of activity behind His back. The focus is on God the Creator, a relational Being, who communicate creatively by speaking to our hearts and minds. However, we listen to Him through the grids of our fears, frustrations and anxieties.

Reflect:

- 1) Study Genesis Chapter 3
- 2) What challenge confronted Adam and Eve in Eden? (Focus on the phrase, "He said to the woman.." (3:1), and compare it with "The Lord God said.." in chapter 2:18?
- 3) How did the fall impact human's capacity to communicate with God? (3:8,10)
- 4) How did God react to the problem? (3:9)

Discuss:

- 1) Make a list of barriers that impact our ability to listen effectively to God's voice.
- 2) Suggestions (Discuss and add to the list)
 - a) Deep unresolved pain
 - b) Dissatisfaction rooted in early religious upbringing
 - c) Authoritarian, chauvinistic, hypocritical unforgiving attitude
 - d) Some find it difficult to live with the reality that can only be accepted by faith
 - e) Allow students to share personal reflections and to list other barriers



3. Listening to Learn:

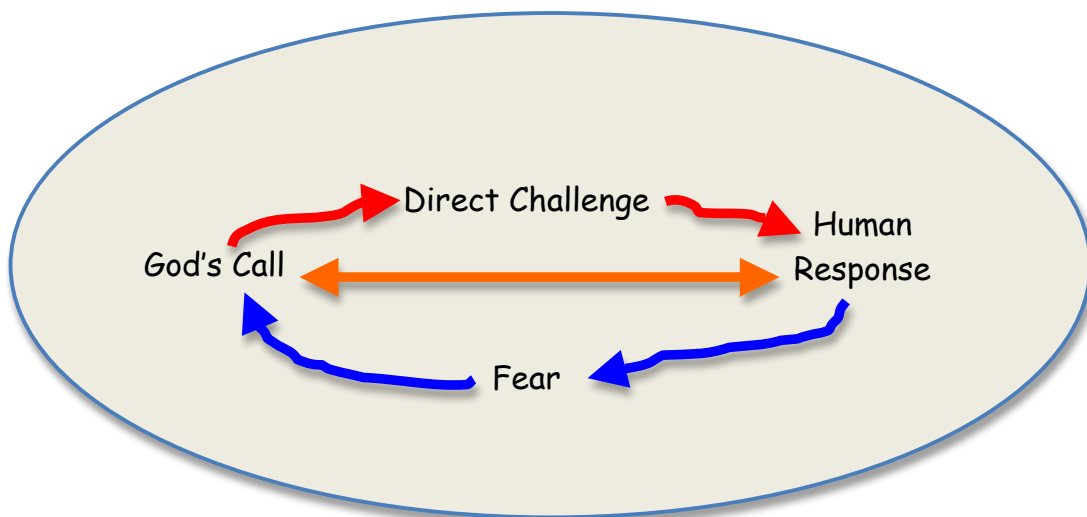
i) Listening to God

Ellen White wrote the following:

...everyone needs to have a personal experience in obtaining a knowledge of the will of God. We must individually hear Him speaking to the heart. When every other voice is hushed, and in quietness we wait before Him, the silence of the soul makes more distinct the voice of God. He bids us, "Be still and know that I am God" (Psalm 46:1). Here alone can true rest be found. ...Amid the hurrying throng and the strain of life's intense activities, the soul that is thus refreshed will be surrounded with the atmosphere of light and peace. The life will breathe out fragrance, and will reveal a divine power that will reach men's heart.³ (Emphasis added)

ii) Ellen White's Listening Journey – Part 1

The message was clear, simple and direct. "In my second vision a week after the first, the Lord gave me a view of the trials through which I must pass, and told me that I must go and relate to others what He had revealed to me."⁴ Naturally, such a challenge raised a reaction. "For several days, and far into the night, I prayed that this burden might be removed from me, and laid upon someone more capable of bearing it. But the light of duty did not change, and the words of the angel sounded continually in my ears, "Make known to others what I have revealed to you."⁵





Note her objections: (Read, Life Sketches, 69-73).

- a) Lack of conviction in the ability to perform the task.
- b) Anticipation of failure
- c) Fear of the lack of support
- d) Fear of self-exaltation.

iii. Ellen White's Listening Journey - Part II

Listening to the challenge of God's call proved to be a painful and emotionally draining experience for young Ellen.

I really coveted death as a release from the responsibilities that were crowding upon me. At length the sweet peace I had so long enjoyed left me, and my soul was plunged in despair. My prayers all seemed vain and my faith was gone. Words of comfort, reproof or encouragement were alike to me, for it seemed that no one could understand me but God, and he had forsaken me. The believers in Portland were ignorant concerning the exercises of my mind that had brought me into this state of despondency, but they knew that for reason some my mind had become depressed, and they felt this was sinful on my part, considering the gracious manner in which the Lord had manifested himself to me.⁶

Take time to evaluate the challenges involved in Ellen White's initial experiences of listening to God's direct call.

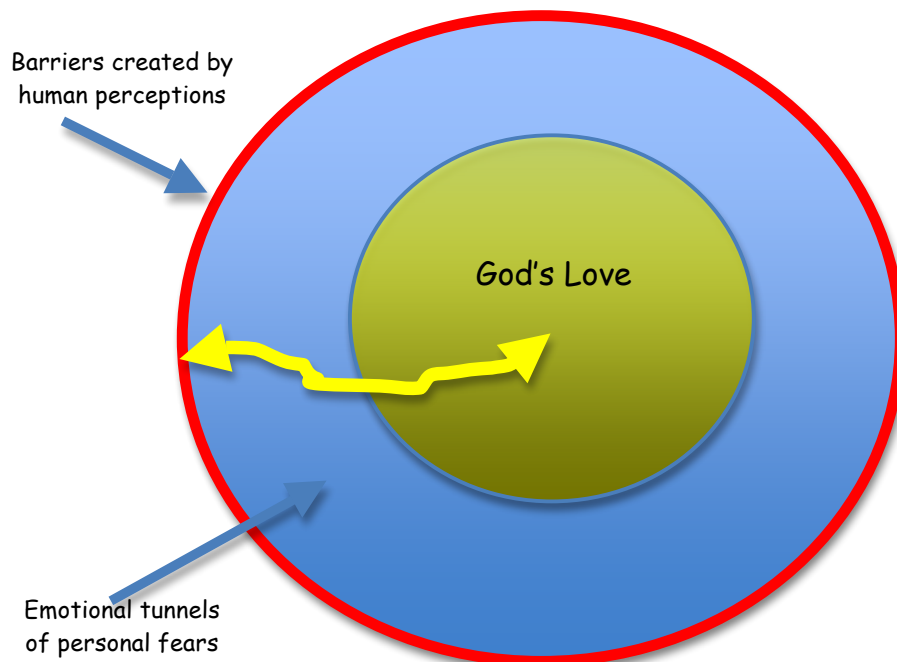
Think It Through:

Bennet suggests. "Embarking on the journey of Christian spiritual transformation is enrolling in the divined school of love. Our primary assignment in this school is not so much study and practice as letting ourselves be deeply loved by our Lord."⁷ Here, listening to God redirects attention away from human inadequacies and fears. Gradually, attentive listening begins to grasp the wonders of God's love. "...the root of Christian love is not the will to love but faith to believe that one is deeply loved by God. Returning to that great love - love that was there for us before we experienced any rejection and that will be there for us after all other rejections take place - is our true spiritual work."⁸



Illustration of the "Listening Journey"

Listening to God includes a number of challenges. For Ellen White, God's call to share the good news of hope and assurance faced a number of barriers. Firstly, she confronted the fear of the difficulties associated with her future work. In response she "coveted death". Secondly, she felt an emotional isolation from the community of believers. They were ignorant of her inner struggle and judged her actions as sinful. (The red line illustrates the barriers caused by perceptions).



Thirdly, Ellen experienced a state of spiritual turmoil. Listening to God through the filters of her fears, she felt isolated from God. It seems that despair took over her faith, trust and confidence. In other words, the journey to God's heart (represented by the yellow pathway) took her through the rough terrain of emotional upheaval (represented by the blue field) lessening her ability to respond to God's call through the eyes of faith. Such a journey is highly personal and lonely. Here young Ellen struggled with isolation caused by the lack of sensitive understanding of the community of faith. "It seemed that no one understood me, but God and He had forsaken me."



Think It Through:

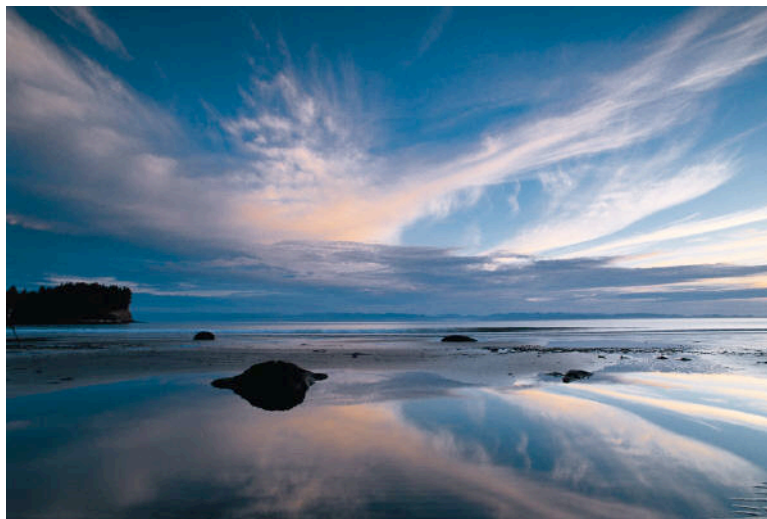
Our primary task in “the divine school of love” is not on doing, achieving and listening to what one wants to hear. Rather, our focus should be on beholding the Lord’s glory (2 Corinthian 3:18). In God’s presence the primary task is to listen to the reassuring affirmation of His attentive presence and love. Journey towards God’s heart involves listening and learning how to allow ourselves to be deeply loved by our God.⁹ No wonder that many years later, Ellen White wrote,

God is love....Every manifestation of creative power is an expression of infinite love. The history of the great conflict between good and evil, from the time it first began in heaven to the final overthrow of rebellion and the total eradication of sin, is also a demonstration of God’s unchanging love.¹⁰

iv. Ellen White’s Listening Journey: Part III – God’s Response

So, how did God respond to Ellen’s dilemma or her lack of faith oriented listening? Take time to understand the world of her inner fears.

A great fear possessed me that God had taken his favor from me forever. As I contemplated the light that had formerly blessed my soul, it seemed doubly precious as contrasted with the darkness that now enveloped me. Meetings were held at my father’s house, but my distress of mind was so great that I did not attend them for some time. My burden grew heavier until the agony of my spirit seemed more than I could bear.¹¹





Two groundbreaking experiences:

How does God respond to our emotional needs? Does he invade the privacy of our fears, as an intruder, seeking dominion and submission or does He enter the world of our fears as guest-giver, offering guest-friendship in the form of assuring presence and attentiveness? ¹² I suggest, that in her first vision, where Ellen White saw Jesus leading his people and assisting them in times of discouragement and struggles, she saw the representation of Jesus as a guest-giver. Guenther shares a beautiful description of the guest-giver's role.

*It is the fact of life that travelers cannot survive in comfort without hospitality, However, prudent their planning and abundant their supplies, if the journey goes on long enough they will need the care of a host, someone who offers a temporary home as a place of rest and refreshment.*¹³

Note God's twofold response to young Ellen as guest-giver during one of the prayer meetings in Ellen's family home.

- a) "The church made my case a special subject of prayer. Father Pearson, who in my earlier experience had opposed the manifestations of the power of God upon me, now prayed earnestly for me, and counseled me to surrender my will to the will of the Lord. Like a tender father he tried to encourage and comfort me, bidding me believe I was not forsaken by the Friend of sinners."¹⁴
- b) "While the prayer was offered for me, that the Lord would give me strength and courage to bear the messages, the thick darkness that had encompassed me rolled back, and a sudden light came upon me. Something that seemed like a ball of fire struck me right over the heart. My strength was taken away, and I fell to the floor. I seemed to be in the presence of the angels. One of the holy beings again repeated the words, "Make known to others what I have revealed to you.

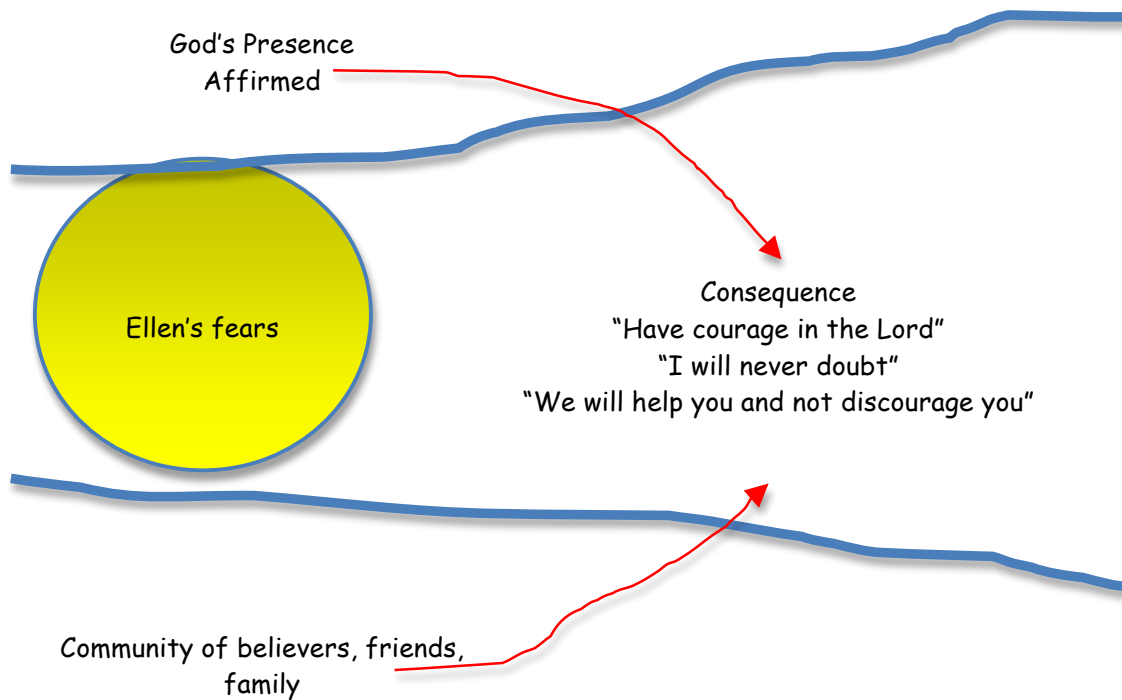
Confirmation of God's attentiveness:

- c) "Father Pearson who could not kneel on account of his rheumatism, witnessed this occurrence. When I revived sufficiently to see and hear; he rose from his chair, and said. I have seen a sight back such as I never expected to see. A ball of fire came down from heaven and struck Sister Ellen Harmon right on the heart. I saw it! I saw it! I can never forget it. It has changed my whole being. *Sister Ellen, have courage in the Lord. After this night I will never doubt again. We will help you henceforth, and not discourage you.*" [Emphasis added]



Illustration of God's Presence – What Does He Communicate?

God communicates relationally. This means he speaks to our hearts and minds not only about important issues of life or factual information but foremost, He enters the world of human fears as the One who offers guest-friendship – assuring presence, courage, attentiveness, a place of rest and refreshment. Note the outcomes.



In this early experience young Ellen required much more than instructive textbook information. In order pass on confidently trust and hope in the living God and to fulfill His purpose, she had to overcome the world of her own fears. Traveling through the tunnel of her humanness, she needed to discover the presence of the guest-giver. It meant to take unhurried time, to listen, to understand and respond appropriately in faith.¹⁵ Firstly, she felt the comforting encouragement to focus on Jesus, "the Friend of sinners."

The moment of divine intervention affirmed God's presence and at the same time dispersed the clouds of doubt bringing into her life uplifting words. "Have courage in the Lord", "we will help you and not discourage you." In this process, God's presence offered tokens of guest-friendship through the community, His extended hands to the world.

*Think It Through:*

John Mallison observes, "To fulfil our purpose on earth we must take unhurried time to listen, to understand and respond appropriately in faith. So life and ministry are meant to be an unending Emmaus Road experience—walking with Jesus, letting him have our undivided attention so that our hearts may 'burn within us', being ignited by his words and his presence."¹⁶

- a) Reflect on the disciples' experience on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-32)
- b) Describe the disciple's emotional state—how did they feel? (Luke 24:17)
- c) Did they understand the events associated with Christ's death?
- d) Why couldn't they recognize Jesus? Surely, he talked to them about His death (Matthew 16:21). Didn't they listen?
- e) Is it possible to misunderstand God's message in the Bible? (Luke 24:25) If so why?
- f) Discuss Christ's approach to the disciple's confusion and disappointment (Luke 24:15). Why did Jesus ask, so many probing questions?
- g) Consider the meaning of Christ's words "And beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scripture concerning himself" (Luke 24:27). If God speaks to us through the Bible what should we hear Him say?
- h) When did the disciples recognize Jesus? (Luke 24:31)
- i) Why did they finally recognize Him when he broke the bread? Why was this event significant?

Note: Is it possible to consider they were allowed to recognize Him at the point where He role-modelled what it means to be God's extended hands in the world, the hands of service (Luke 22: 24-27).

- j) Reflecting on Ellen White's early experience what does it mean to listen to God and what does God want us to hear?
- k) At an early age God called Ellen White for a specific role, how can we hear God's purpose for our life? What should we listen for and how can we hear His voice or is it just a matter of our personal choice?
- l) How can we learn to help others to hear God's voice?



v. The Fears God Only Can Disperse

Listening to God involves an authentic awareness and recognition of one's own self-oriented predisposition. Such recognition sparks a cry of intense anxiety for God's presence, a cry for renewal of thoughts, emotions and perceptions. "Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me" (Psalm 51:10). Note how Ellen describes the intensity of her struggle with fear of self-exaltation.

One great fear that had oppressed me was that if I obeyed the call to duty, and went out declaring myself to be one favored of the Most High with visions and revelations for the people, I might yield to sinful exaltation and be lifted above the station that was right for me to occupy, bring upon myself displeasure of God and lose my own soul. I had known of several such cases and my heart shrank from the trying ordeal. I now entreated that if I must go and relate what the Lord had shown me, I might be preserved from undue exaltation.¹⁷

Listening to God's response:

Said the angel, "Your prayers are heard, and shall be answered. If this evil that you dread threatens you, the hand of God will be stretched out to save you; by affliction He will draw you to Himself, and preserve your humility. Deliver your message faithfully, endure unto the end, and you shall eat the fruit of the tree of life and drink the water of life."¹⁸

Think It Through:

- a) Discuss God's response "by affliction He will draw you to Himself and preserve your humility." What did God mean?
- b) In what way can adverse circumstances lead us to God's presence?
- c) Think of a situation in your life where God stretched His hand to respond to your needs. How did this experience impact your life? Your view of God? How did it help you to faithfully journey on?
- d) "In the harsh circumstances of the desert or the frontier, hospitality offers more than comfort: it also ensures physical survival. Spiritually, too, we cannot make it through the desert or across the frontier alone..."¹⁹ Note, God's response to Ellen, "the hand of God will be stretched out to save you". How does God's promise fit into your struggles with self?



Reflection:

Listening to God places individuals at the crossroad of self-sufficiency, self-reliance and self-dependency and the challenge of complete surrender to God. Listening to God is a life changing experience but not without pain and heartache. At the same time, attentive listening to Jesus, the guest-giver impacts our unique self-understanding. As Benner points out, "The unique self is found only in Christ and in the fullness of his life in and through me."²⁰ Here listening to God and His revelation, leads to a reversal of human attitudes and security (John 10:27-28). Listening to Jesus is transformational. It involves the process of learning to unlearn. "Every step in life may bring us closer to Jesus, may give us a deeper experience of His love, and may bring us one step nearer to the blessed home of peace."²¹





4. Listening to Unlearn

Spiritual journey takes the individual through a variety of experiences, “side trips, returns to former sites, forays into the unknown”.²² Reflecting on the profoundness of such a spiritual walk with God, Ellen White wrote the following. “Many are the ways in which God is seeking to make Himself known to us and bring us into communion (relationship) with Him.”²³ Did the intensity of her spiritual walk with God impact her life? Did it change her views?

i. Ellen’s Reflections

Ellen White’s diary entry dated January 11, 1876 notes the following. “We were blessed with another beautiful day. I devoted my time to writing, filling in the broken links in the history of my life.”²⁴ While in California, now at the age of forty-nine, Ellen White published a series of biographical sketches between January 6 and May 11. As stated in her husband James’ short editorial, there was a specific need. “Extremes in the Christian lives of many are the result of those wrong teachings which clothe in bewildering mysteries the pure, simple and plain teachings of the Bible relatively to the way of life.”²⁵ James’ editorial suggests that he was concerned about the nature of conversion. He was concerned for young people who “despair in reaching a life of holiness and perfect obedience.” Such a view is followed by a “decided distaste for what is supposed to be the religion of the Bible.”²⁶ So did Ellen react?

- a. She began her reflections saying, “I can now look back upon my youthful experience and see how near I came to making a fatal mistake.”²⁷
- b. Identifying the problem by reflecting on her life experience.

I had read many of the religious biographies of children who had possessed numberless virtues and lived faultless lives. I had conceived a great admiration for the paragons of perfection there represented. But far from encouraging me in my efforts to become a Christian, these books were as stumbling-blocks to my feet. I despaired of ever attaining to the perfection of the youthful characters in those stories who lived the lives of saints and were free from all the doubts, and sins, and weaknesses under which I staggered. Their faultless lives were followed by a premature but happy death, and the biographers tacitly intimated that they were too pure and good for earth, therefore, God in his divine pity had removed them from its uncongenial atmosphere. The similarity of these avowedly true histories seemed to point the fact to my youthful mind, that they really presented a correct picture of a child's Christian life. I repeated to myself again and again, 'If that is true, I can never be a Christian. I can never hope to be like those children,' and was driven by this thought to discouragement and almost to despair. But when I learned that I could come to Jesus just as I was, that the Saviour had come to ransom just such unworthy sinners, then light broke upon my darkness, and I could claim the promises of God.”²⁸



- c. Note her strong reflective reaction.

Later experiences have convinced me that these biographies of immaculate [perfect children] mislead the youth.

She continued,

They extol the amiable qualities of their characters, and suppress their faults and failures. If they were represented as struggling with temptations, occasionally vanquished, yet triumphing over their trials in the end, if they were represented as subject to human frailties, and beset by ordinary temptations, then children would see that they had experienced like trials with themselves, yet had conquered through the grace of God. Such examples would give them fresh courage to rent their efforts to serve the Lord, hoping to triumph as those before them had done. But the sober realities and errors of the young Christian's life were vigorously kept out of sight, while the virtues were so exaggerated as to lift them from above the common level of ordinary children, who naturally despair of ever reaching such excellence and therefore give up the effort, in many cases, and gradually sink into a state of indifference.²⁹

Reflections:

- a) Identify the issues faced by the youthful Ellen White?
- b) "Later experiences convinced me", what experiences is she referring to?
- c) What was so tragic about her early beliefs and what impact do such views exert on young minds?
- d) What did Ellen White mean by "the sober realities and errors of the young Christian's life were vigorously kept out of sight"?
- e) How can such erroneous views, which nearly led Ellen White to make a fatal mistake, impact the process of listening to God?
- f) What does God want us to hear?



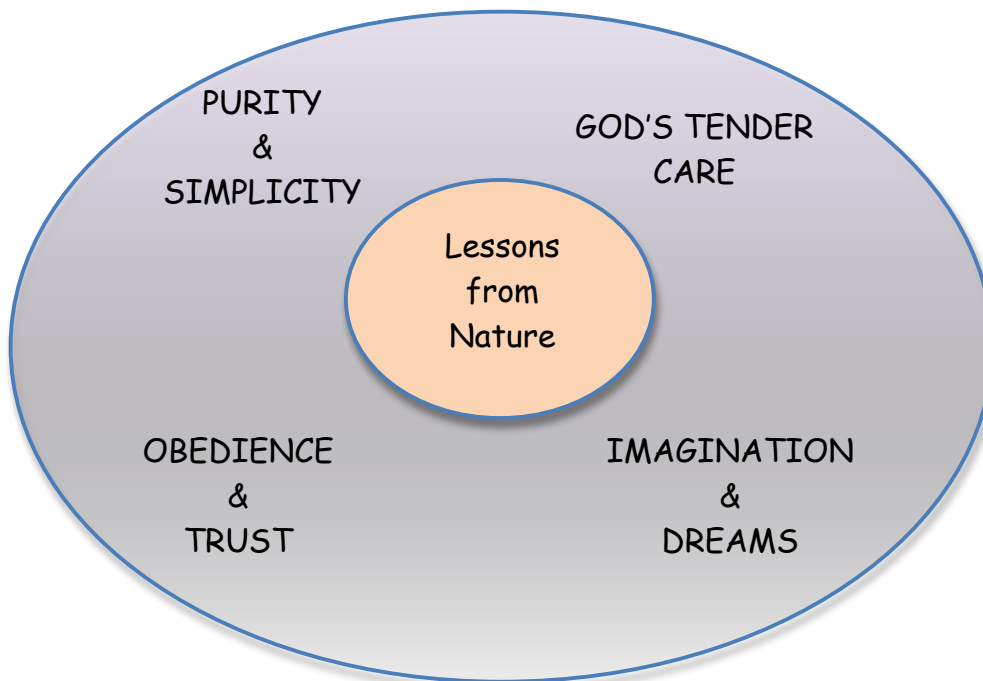
5. Places where one can listen to God

Take time to explore Ellen White's summary of the listening journey, the places where one can hear God's voice.

i. Nature

"Many are the ways in which God is seeking to make Himself known to us and bring us into a communion [relationship] with him...the listening ear can hear and understand the communications of God through the things of nature"
(Ellen White, *Steps to Christ*, 85)

Lessons to be learned from the wonders of nature: (Read, *Steps to Christ*, pages, 85-7)



- a. What does nature reveal to us about the beauty of God?
- b. In what ways do the above characteristics apply to life's journey?



ii. God's providential workings.

"God speaks to us through His providential workings...In our circumstances and surroundings, in the changes daily taking place around us, we may find precious lessons, if our hearts are open to discern them."

(Steps to Christ, 87)

Lessons to be learned from God's providential workings (Read, *Steps to Christ*, page 87)



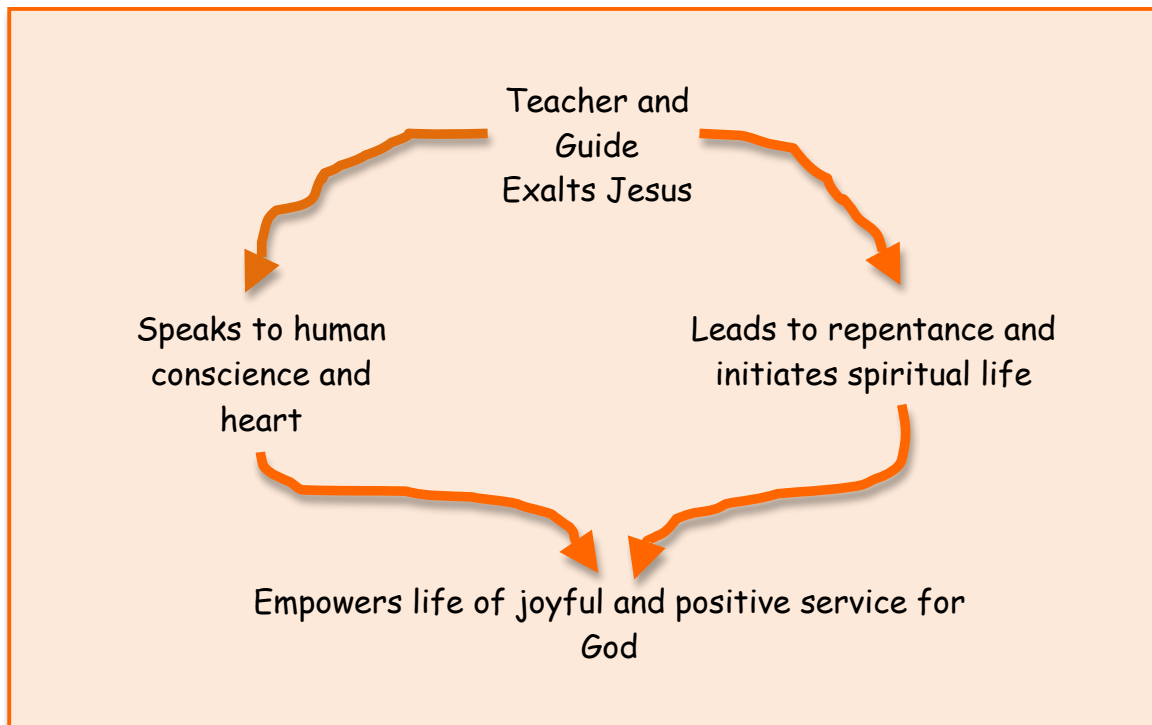
- a. How can one discern God's providential guidance in the variety of "changes daily taking place around us"?
- b. In spite of all the evil things how can one understand God's goodness and loving-kindness?



iii. The influence of the Holy Spirit

"God speaks to us through His providential workings and through the influence of the Holy Spirit upon the heart"
(Steps to Christ, 87)

Lessons to be learned from the influence of the Holy Spirit upon the heart. (Read *Steps to Christ*, pages 91, 26, 28, 47, 63, 68)



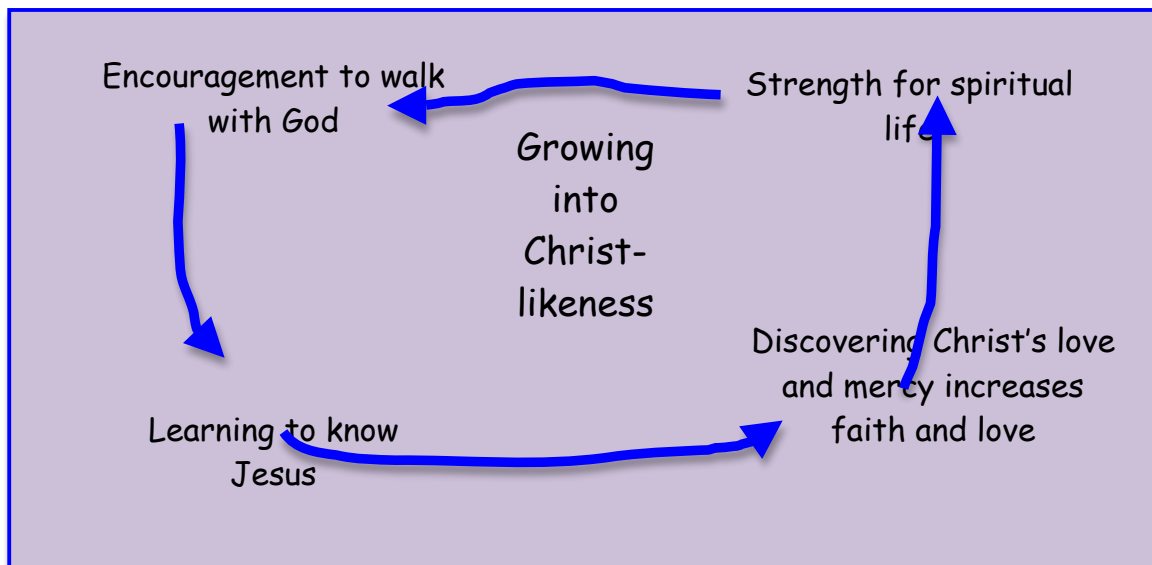
- a. What does the work of the Holy Spirit reveal to us about God?
- b. How does one listen to the voice of the Holy Spirit?



iv. The Bible

"God speaks to us in His Word. Here we have in clearer lines the revelation of His character, of His dealings with men and the great work of redemption."
(*Steps to Christ*, 87)

Lessons to be learned from God's voice in the Bible. (Read, *Steps to Christ*, page, 87-91)



- a. What does God reveal to us about Himself in the Bible?
- b. Ellen White highlights the benefit of listening to God through the Bible as follows: "There will be more constant confidence in Jesus, and a daily experience in His power to save to the uttermost all that come unto God by Him" (89). How can we make listening to God's voice in the Bible more relevant in our life's journey?



So, how do Ellen White's visions and revelations fit into the picture?

One great fear that had oppressed me was that if I obeyed the call of duty, and went out declaring myself to be one favored of the Most High with visions and revelations for the people, I might yield to sinful exaltation....³⁰

During the seventy years of her ministry Ellen White received approximately 2,000 dreams and visions.³¹ What was God's purpose in communicating through Ellen White in this direct and intentional manner? What role does this mode of God's communication play in the spiritual journey of the community towards the final meeting point with God?

- a) Firstly, they remind us that God is actively involved in human life and the affairs of human history.
- b) Secondly, they remind us of our need of spiritual authenticity, confidence, perseverance and they remind us to focus on what matters to God most. "For just in a little while, He who is coming will come and will not delay" (Hebrews 10:35-36)

During the final stage of the pilgrimage God raised a prophetic voice to provide a tangible evidence of His presence, leading, guidance and to remind the community of what really matters to God. The purpose of such voice is to,

- a) Provide comfort and encouragement;
- b) Remind of Christ's continual presence and involvement in life's journey;
- c) Assure the believers of Christ's Second Coming.



Through the life and ministry of Ellen White, God inspires his followers to focus on the pilgrimage. Her inspired writings continue to encourage the community of faith, both young and old, *to concentrate on the essential elements of life's journey* – the things that matter most to God.

"Now this is life eternal that they may know you the only true God
and Jesus Christ whom you have sent"
John 17:3

The Bible Reveals

- Encouragement to walk with God
- Learning to know Jesus
- Discovering Christ's love and mercy increases faith and love
- Strength for spiritual walk

The Holy Spirit Guides

- Teacher and Guide
- Speaks to human heart and conscience
- Initiates spiritual life
- Empowers joyful service

God's Providential Leading Unfold

God's goodness
God's loving-kindness

Nature Reminds

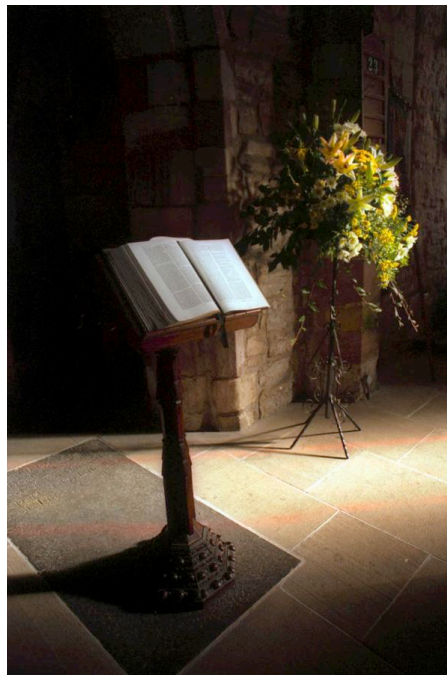
- Purity and Simplicity
- Obedience and Trust
- God's Tender Care
- Inspires with dreams of God's future creativity



6. Conclusion

Listening to God means learning to know God and not about God. The question one needs to pose is, who is this God that one should commit life to Him? However, on this journey, God has a pathway for every person, a pathway that leads to His presence, a pathway which enables every person to develop an intimate relationship with Him. The journey is so special that in future God will favour every faithful person with a new name. "I will give him a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to him who receives it" (Revelation 2:17). May I dare to suggest that the new name is a nickname known only to God who patiently guides us through the storms of life and who knows us intimately. Having such a confident relationship with God, impacts our daily walk with God. Keeping this thought in mind we will explore Ellen White's walk with God.

"Let the morning bring me word of your unfailing love
for I have put my trust in you. Show me the way I
should go for to you I uplift my soul"
Psalm 143:8





¹ Margaret Guenther, *Holy Listening: The Art of Spiritual Direction* (Boston, MA: Cowley Publications, 1992), 1.

² Ellen White, *Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1898), 19.

³ *Ibid.*, 363.

⁴ Ellen White, *Life Sketches* (Mountain View: CA, 1915), 69.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Ellen White, *Life Sketches, Ancestry, Early Life, Christian Experience and Extensive Labours of Elder James White and His Wife Mrs Ellen White* (Battle Creek, MI: Steam Press, 1888), 195.

⁷ David G. Benner, *Sacred Companions: The Gift of Spiritual Friendship & Direction* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 34.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Ellen White, *Patriarchs and Prophets* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1958), 33.

¹¹ Ellen White, *Life Sketches of James and Ellen White*, 195.

¹² Guenther, *Holy Listening*, 110.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 9

¹⁴ Ellen White, LSms, 92.

¹⁵ John Mallison, *Mentoring to Develop Disciples Leaders* (Adelaide, SA: Openbook Publishers, 1998), 46.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Ellen White, LSms, 94.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Guenther, *Holy Listening*, 9.

²⁰ Benner, *Sacred Companions*, 39.

²¹ Ellen White, *Steps to Christ* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1892), 125.

²² Janet O. Hagberg & Robert A. Guelich, *The Critical Journey: Stages in the Life of Faith* (Salem, Wisconsin: Sheffield Publishing Company, 2005), 5.

²³ Ellen White, *Steps to Christ*, 85

²⁴ Ellen White, Diary Entry, January 11, 1876

²⁵ James White, Signs of the Times, February 3, 1876.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Ellen White, LSms, 93.3

³¹ Herbert Douglas, *Messenger of the Lord* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 1998), 546–49. See the selection of vision which made a significant contribution to the church.