

Listening Can Transform a Life

Most Christians today are aware of the New Testament admonitions to children to obey their parents in the Lord. But what do you think Joseph and Mary taught Jesus, since they only had the Old Testament? Surely to *listen*. Listening is a key to wisdom, which is the subject of the Book of Proverbs.

Proverbs 23:22:

Listen to your father who gave you life,
and do not despise your mother when she is old.

Proverbs 1:8,9:

Hear, my son, your father's instruction,
and forsake not your mother's teaching,

for they are a graceful garland for your head
and pendants for your neck.

The Book of Hebrews teaches us that Jesus *learned obedience*. How do you think that foundation was laid in his life? Surely by his parents' diligent scriptural instruction to *listen and obey*.

How refreshing it is to see a child who has been raised up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord to the point where they are able and willing to start subordinating their will to others instead of insisting on their own way all the time. This journey is different for every child, and for some it is not easy; but the patient perseverance of parents in teaching and showing by example can help to eventually break through the willfulness of youth.

Listening is essential if we want to live in happiness and prosperity our whole lives long.

Listening can transform a life, a child, an adult, a couple, a family, a nation, a people.

Let's consider the role that listening had to play in the events surrounding the birth of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

We'll consider various Scriptures from the ESV about [individuals who listened to God and thus had a part in the events leading up to and following Christ's birth](#).

Zechariah Listens

Our story starts with the priest Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth. Zechariah means "God has remembered," while Elizabeth means "oath of God." Because God remembered His oath — in effect, [listening and acting on His oath](#) — a child would be born to this couple.

A disappointment in the lives of Zechariah and Elizabeth was that they had not been able to have a child. With the appearance of the angel Gabriel to Zechariah in the temple, Zechariah learned that their petition to God had been heard and that Elizabeth would bear him a son despite their advanced age. Dumbstruck by this news, Zechariah found it too hard to believe, even though the angel had told him clearly that his child John would be great before the Lord, and that he would be the one to prepare the people for the Lord's coming. As a result of his unbelief, Zechariah remained unable to speak until John's birth.

[God had listened](#) to Zechariah and Elizabeth's petition, and fulfilled it by sending His angel to announce the good news of John's upcoming birth. Now all that Zechariah could do was to [watch and listen](#) until the momentous event. In the meantime, God was at work on other fronts.

Mary Hears God Out

The young girl Mary was married but had not yet begun living with her groom Joseph. A spiritually precocious teenager, she [lived in an attitude of prayerful listening](#) to God. When the angel of God appeared to her, she was ready to [hear him out](#), whatever he had to say. Though she and Joseph had not yet come together, she learned that she would soon bear a child whose Father would be, not her husband, but God. How many people would be ready to hear and receive such a humanly

preposterous message? Yet it was true — and Mary did accept it. Surely she must have carefully [cultivated the habit of listening from the earliest age, hearkening to her parents](#). Now she would have the once-in-all-history opportunity to bear the Messiah himself!

Mary's confession is truly remarkable.

Luke 1:38:

And Mary said, "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." ...

No more, no less. Believing the angel's message, Mary judged that nothing would be impossible with God. And she did conceive, just as the angel had said.

Mary's decision to [trust and obey](#) had consequences which she would have to work out. At some point, she would have to convey the news of her pregnancy to Joseph. How would he react? She had to [trust God fully for the outcome](#), since Joseph would be the one responsible to decide how to handle the unforeseen pregnancy. But because she [knew God was listening to her](#), Mary was prepared to relinquish matters to God. And God did intervene on her behalf.

Joseph Heeds

Joseph deeply loved and cared for Mary and agonized over the choice before him. According to the law, there were only two options for a husband whose wife had committed adultery: either to have her stoned, or to divorce her. Joseph had resolved himself to divorce her. But there was a third, hitherto unknown option, which only God could allow: that he should retain her as his wife. This is what God via the angel revealed and told Joseph to do, and Joseph [heeded the message](#).

Had men been responsible for sending the Messiah, they probably would have arranged to first inform the husband, who then would have informed his wife that she would need to get herself prepared to be able to deliver the baby. How interesting that God chose not to do it this way, but instead addressed the woman directly without her

husband's prior knowledge. After all, it would be she and not her husband who would be giving birth — something the man clearly could not do. Yet this broke all the rules. Well, as the Author of the law, isn't God greater than the law? Most certainly — and this is something Mary clearly recognized.

We have noted how Joseph [humbled himself to listen to God](#). No less important was his decision to [listen to his wife](#). He didn't try to give her a hard time because God had talked to her first. No, he swallowed his pride and dutifully acted to preserve their union so they could together raise the child that God was sending. I'm sure he would have originally hoped to raise his own firstborn first, but he instead subjugated that personal desire to the will of God so he could have the privilege of helping to raise this child who would be, not the son of Joseph, but the Son of God. Quite a man!

Elizabeth Knows and Sees

Which brings us back to the women, Mary and Elizabeth.

Elizabeth stands out in Scripture as the first person to confess Jesus Christ come in the flesh. And how well she deserved that opportunity as the one who believed in her old age to bear Christ's forerunner!

Reading the passage where the young Mary shows up at her cousin Elizabeth's doorstep for a three-month stay, we tend to think of it all as a foregone conclusion. But it was not! Mary didn't say a word to Elizabeth before Elizabeth burst out

Luke 2:42b, 43:

... "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb!

And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me?

Talk about being tapped into God! Elizabeth didn't need for Mary to tell her the news because she was filled with the holy spirit and got the inside track via revelation. Not only did she know within herself that

Mary was pregnant, but she furthermore knew at once that the baby she was carrying would be “the Lord,” the Messiah, the Christ. How thrilling for her, and how reaffirming for Mary! Mary subsequently confirmed this observation with her own song of praise, after which Elizabeth welcomed her into their home for three months.

Zechariah Proclaims What He Hears

And now we return to Zechariah. Like Joseph, he was married to a strong, God-fearing woman, and God was speaking directly to her just as He was speaking directly to him. Thank God that Zechariah had the humility not to berate his wife for revealing to those gathered at the birth that the boy’s name would be, not Zechariah, but John — meaning “Jehovah shows favor.” When Zechariah confirmed this in writing, his tongue was loosed and he himself gave the most wonderful prophecy about his son that he could have only received because he was [listening to God](#).

Zechariah had earlier welcomed Elizabeth’s cousin Mary into their home for three months. Certainly during that time he would have learned of the tremendous news that the child that Mary would bring forth would be the long-hoped-for Messiah. So, far from listening exclusively to God, Zechariah showed his humility by also [listening to his wife and furthermore, to her cousin, the mother of his Lord](#).

God in turned blessed Zechariah and Elizabeth with the unique privilege to raise a child who was filled with the spirit from the very hour of his birth. How particularly wonderful and special that must have been for them!

The Expectant Shepherds Saw and Heard

Like the child’s mother Mary, the shepherds knew how to [give ear by watchfully waiting for the voice of God](#). They had no problem realizing the import of what had just occurred after hearing the announcement of Christ’s birth from the angel and the heavenly host. Although they were on duty with their flocks, they did whatever was necessary to high-tail it out of there just as soon as they knew where to go and how to find the newborn babe. Once they had actually seen him, they took

it upon themselves to tell as many others as they could about what God had done for His people Israel.

Just look at the impact of their listening hearts on the child's parents and on the community at large.

Luke 2:17-19:

And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child.

And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them.

But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Simeon Got a Hearing with God

Not coincidentally, when Joseph and Mary brought the child Jesus to the temple on the eighth day, God had arranged for more to happen than just the child's dedication to the Lord.

God had told a devout man named Simeon (which means "hearing") that he would not die before seeing the Lord's Christ. Ever on the alert, Simeon came by the spirit into the temple on the very day and at the precise time that his parents did; and Simeon knew by way of the holy spirit exactly what was going on. Here was his prophecy:

Luke 2:29-32:

"Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace,
according to your word;

for my eyes have seen your salvation

that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,

a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people
Israel."

Because Simeon was [on the lookout to hear from God](#), just look at the blessings that followed: his parents marveled, and Mary was informed of what awaited her in her own subsequent life.

A further open door involved

Anna Hearing

Like Simeon, the prophetess Anna had been waiting for this day for what seemed like forever, in the temple night and day for decade upon decade. Understanding her heart's expectation, it's hardly incredible to think that she would show up at the very moment of Simeon's prophecy. And of course, she then gladly spread the word abroad to all who like her were waiting for the Redeemer.

Blessings in Later Life

It's worth taking a moment to reflect on the long-term blessings on those who make a practice of listening to and heeding God's call.

- Mary lived long enough to be a witness of both the resurrection and the ascension, and was likely there on the Day of Pentecost to get born again, confessing Jesus as Lord.
- Joseph had the joy of being the adoptive father of the Son of God, raising him for at least the first twelve years of his life.
- Zechariah and Elizabeth's long-deferred dreams of being parents were realized, and they got to raise Christ's forerunner, the prophet of the Most High.
- The shepherds got to see the Christ on the day of his birth, rejoicing in the knowledge that as promised, the newborn King would be a descendant of the original shepherd-king David. Surely God would have protected any of their progeny threatened by the slaughter of the innocents at Bethlehem.
- Even though he didn't live long enough to be a part of Jesus Christ's ministry on earth, Simeon got to see the Messiah before he himself fell asleep. Some have said that this same Simeon was the father of Gamaliel, at whose feet Saul of Tarsus learned the law. If that were true, wouldn't that be just like God, preparing the way for His people in all ages?

We have seen many ways to listen: hearing and trusting, heeding and obeying. We can take inspiration from the example of our forefathers who listened to and heeded God, reaping a blessing for eternity. May we too so learn to hearken to the voice of God and rejoice in the profusion of blessings!