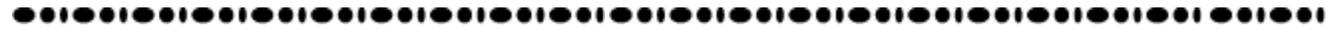


Week Two

THE VOICE



THE SOLITARY WORD

There's something we must read.

We must read it slowly. We must read it carefully. We must listen for a solitary word, an echo—a reverberation of something we've already heard.

The word of God, God's voice, is referred to as...

...living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart (Hebrews 4:12).

Did you hear it?

What is the wellspring of life? What are we to guard?

The heart.

The heart is the wellspring of life. That's where this started. And what did we just hear? We heard an echo of that very word, that very idea, that innermost part of our being—the heart. God's voice, his speaking to us, is sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow, and get this...

It judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.

That wellspring of existence.

That source of desires.

This should pique our interest. And let's be honest.

This should bother us. Judges? We're not sure we like that.

Let's do something else.

Careful though. Not so fast. Let's be open, if just for a moment. Peel back the layers of our hearts and what do we discover? Some things we love; we treasure these things. Other things we disdain; we long to be free of these things. What does it take to be free of things we disdain? If we have cancerous tumors in our body, we disdain them. We travel long distances in search of a cure. We write our last checks. We beg the doctor to *judge* the situation accurately, so the situation can be dealt with properly. Those tumors must be cut out with the double-edged scalpel. We have no problem with this kind of discernment, with that kind of judging.

What would we say to our doctor?

Bring it on, wise doctor, bring it on.

Consider this...

THE VOICE

What if our spiritual self is much like our physical self?

Our physical self has strengths and weaknesses, good days and bad days, health and sickness. What if our spiritual self reflects a similar reality? What if there are aspects of our spiritual self that must be dealt with? If so, would we not welcome, would we not pursue, would we not seek this living and active voice of God that divides between soul and spirit, joint and marrow, while judging the attitudes and thoughts of our hearts?

What would we say to our God?

Bring it on, wise God, bring it on.

SCRIPTURE

Common understanding of the double-edged sword is that the sword is Scripture. This interpretation is well-founded. The writer of Hebrews, when speaking of God's voice in this very context, explains that God "spoke through David" and then quotes David's words in Psalm 95 (Hebrews 4:7). So the very words of Scripture are referenced as the very words of God.

With that said, a misapplication of this truth is also common. When Christ walked this earth, he walked amongst a people who greatly revered Scripture. The religious leaders of his day knew Scripture well. Many had great portions of it memorized. They carefully copied and recopied the littlest details and the finest points. And yet, with all of their reverence and all of their caution, many of these leaders missed the very purpose of Scripture.

When addressing these leaders, Christ said,

You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life (John 5:39-40).

That's fascinating.

These leaders diligently studied the Scriptures thinking they'd gain life, but the Scriptures were intended to lead them to another end and not be an end in themselves. Rather than letting Scripture inspire and inform their worship of God, they worshipped Scripture as if Scripture itself is god. Scripture testifies not just to something, a collection of beliefs and ideas, but to Someone, the very personhood of God. The purpose of these passages was and is to bring the reader into an encounter with God. Scripture testifies about Christ, and Christ, the Son of God, personifies God and leads us to God.

And the testifying continues to this day.

So engaging Scripture is a movement from the pages to a person, the person of Christ. Scripture, the very word of God, informs a conversation, a relationship, an interacting not just with the sword itself, but with the one who graciously wields the sword for our good.

Why is this important?

It's important because reading Scripture holds tremendous potential. Deep within us is the wellspring of life, this heart of ours, and the voice of God can get down in there and do great good. If that's the case, we're wise to carefully consider how this happens. How does God speak? What is God saying? What has God said to generations before that may apply to my life today? If the voice of God is truly available, then we'd be wise to listen.

THE VOICE

But let's be honest. As good as all this sounds, common experience is often different. Reading Scripture is sometimes boring.

Maybe we hear it read from the front of a church. The person reading goes on and on, and we're completely lost. We quietly wonder: Is anyone really listening? Or maybe we're inspired to pick it up ourselves. We find a passage that looks promising, and in short order, our eyes cross. If this is supposed to be a meaningful experience, we wonder: How does this happen? How do we position ourselves with Scripture in a manner that truly brings about change by truly bringing an encounter with God? This is a rich and essential question. When Christ returned to the Father's side, he said, "*I am with you always, to the very end of the age*" (Matthew 28:20). If Christ is with us, how do we engage his presence? How do we talk to him? How do we listen to him?

Let's consider a possibility.

Maybe Scripture is boring when it's treated as dry words on a page rather than words from God that invigorate a living and breathing relationship. Maybe Scripture is frustrating when rather than coming to Scripture humbly to hear the voice of God, we come to Scripture arrogantly in search of justifying our own ideas and our own agenda. Or maybe there are aspects of Scripture that are simply an acquired taste. Maybe we're experiencing the normal and understandable reality of reading from pages that are new to us, and we simply need to exercise perseverance. Maybe it's all of these or some of these, but whatever it is, if there is truly the possibility of an encounter with God, there's something in this worthy of our attention.

Consider the possibilities.

What if Scripture not only informed our conversation with God but inspired our conversation with God? What if the stories, the poems, the teachings, and the wisdom gave us insight into this God who walks with us and indwells us so we now know how to recognize his voice and his presence? What if we didn't just read Scripture, but what if we meditated on it, talked with God about it, and opened our hearts up to God in conversational prayer? No, we do not go beyond the bounds of Scripture, but yes, we avoid the error of the Pharisees and let Scripture testify to Christ so we are well informed to authentically walk with Christ through life. What if we did this? What if we truly talked and listened to God?

CONVERSATIONS WITH GOD

Throughout this *Morph* experience, you are asked to engage in a daily exercise that will feel either risky or right, depending upon your perspective, and to be truthful, it's probably a bit of both. This exercise, if engaged well, will be the exercise you carry with you after you have completed this module and subsequent *Morph* modules. Yes, you'll learn from the *Morph* Readings, but the readings will end. Yes, you'll learn from the *Morph* Me exercises, but these too will end. This exercise is one that could end, but it must not. End this exercise and this entire *Morph* experience will have been for nothing. Engage this exercise, and continue engaging this exercise, and not only will you morph from this experience, but you will continue to be transformed throughout your life.

The exercise?

You are asked to have Conversations with God.

Yes, a daily conversation with your Creator. No, not a quick read of a passage of Scripture to simply get through it. No, not a rote prayer that means and gains nothing. Yes, an ongoing and intentional conversation with the One who knows you best. Yes, a real conversation where you do what you do in all real conversations. You both listen and talk. No doubt you've had friends who talk but never

THE VOICE

listen or listen but never talk. These are frustrating conversations that lack a healthy give and take. This conversation with God must be both. It must involve thoughtful and reflective listening, and it must involve honest and open talking.

What follows is a suggested path to initiate conversations with God. This suggested path is not intended to impose itself as the only good approach. Like conversing with people, there are countless ways to converse with God. This path is suggested, though, because it is simple while holding potential for profound encounters with God. By walking through three simple phases, both those new to conversing with God and those who have talked with God for years will discover greater depth and resonance in their conversations.

Very simply, the phases are this...

Read
Memorize
Meditate

READ

Each week you will be given five suggested readings from Scripture. Scripture is eclectic. Some sections read like stories while other sections read like teaching. There is poetry and wisdom, parables and prophecy. The five readings for a given week will all come from one particular genre. One week, they will be psalms; another week, the teachings of Christ or proverbial wisdom. How you read these passages is informed by what you're reading. When the readings are stories, for example, the selected passages will be a bit longer and can be read straight through. When the readings are teachings, they will be shorter, and you'll be encouraged to read them multiple times. With each week, the Conversations with God page will give a brief introduction with guidance on how to make the most of that week's selections. With that said, there is an error we must guard against, irrespective of the nature of the passages.

There are two ways to read Scripture. The first is quite common, and the second all too rare: We can read to get through the passage, or we can read to get the passage through us. If we read to get through the passage, to get a little star on our chart, the reading will carry little benefit. If, instead, we read to get the passage through us, there is strong potential for genuine life change. This kind of reading pursues the God behind the words. We want to hear from him. We want to understand him. We want to experience him. In your reading, don't just read. Listen. Listen for the voice of God. If it's a story, what can you discover about God and about yourself through that story? If it is teaching, what aspect of the teaching is God impressing upon you? If it is wisdom, how might we confront our own foolishness? This is not just reading. This is listening and connecting to our Creator.

MEMORIZE

This second phase complements the first phase and then leads naturally to the third phase. Each week, as part of the five suggested readings, you're asked to memorize (yes, memorize) two short passages. The passages will either come from the readings or be closely related in thought or topic. In this *Morph* module, and in each of the subsequent *Morph* modules, you are given twenty-five passages to memorize. By simply memorizing two passages per week, a doable amount, through this *Morph* experience you will have a hundred passages committed to memory. Yes, with each *Morph* module being eight weeks long, and by memorizing two passages per week, this practice will continue after each module ends. This is by design. Conversing with God must not end when *Morph* ends.

THE VOICE

Why memorize?

For starters, let's consider what the purpose is not. The purpose is not so we can lob verses of Scripture at any passerby. It's not so we can become quote-a-holics who have a verse to complement any situation and circumstance. Yes, there will be times you're in conversation with friends and a passage of Scripture will come to mind that will enhance the conversation. That's a welcomed benefit. The more central benefit goes much deeper and is much more personal.

Scripture calls us to "*prepare your minds for action*" (1 Peter 1:13). The original language is a call to "gird up the loins of your mind." Odd? To our ears, very odd, but not to the ears of the original recipients. A "loin" is what they wore. Picture a robe. If they needed to move quickly, they would grab hold of the robe, or gird it up, to keep from tripping over themselves. Spiritually and emotionally, tripping over ourselves is common practice. For this reason, we are called to "gird up the loins of our minds." In our language a closer parallel might be to "roll up the shirt sleeves of your minds." Memorizing Scripture is one way we do this. We posture our thought-life with strength. Rather than letting our thoughts come against us leading to a downward spiral of negativity, we fill our minds with thoughts that inspire greater and deeper conversations with God.

A second reason for memorizing Scripture is how this practice leads naturally to the third and richest phase of conversing with God. It's in this third phase where the conversation gets personal and comes to life.

MEDITATE

The word *meditation* conjures up a host of images. For some, these images feel very natural. For others, they're foreign. In truth, whether we realize it or not, we all meditate. As we drive down the road, for example, our minds turn to something. Maybe we mull over a frustrating conversation with a co-worker. Maybe we recall a wound we experienced years ago. Or maybe the mind goes in the gutter as we drift toward thoughts of vanity, greed, anger, or lust. We rehearse these thoughts, over and over, and whether we like it or not, these thoughts shape us. Scripture says as much...

Blessed are those who...meditate on God's law day and night. They are like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither—whatever they do prospers (Psalm 1:1-3).

The imagery is powerful. If a tree is planted by water that is good and pure, that tree is meditating on that water, and it will thrive. If, though, that water is toxic and poisonous, the tree will wither and fade. Those who mediate on God's thoughts, the psalmist tells us, are like a tree planted by streams of water. By meditation, by thinking God's thoughts and conversing with him about these thoughts, we experience the kind of growth we were created to experience. Trees were not created to shrivel and die. Trees were created to grow and thrive.

So very simply, meditating, as encouraged here, is simply talking and listening to God. The conversation is inspired and informed by the reading and memorizing, but the conversation is now personalized. We carefully consider the passage, but we don't *just* consider the passage. We talk, and we listen. If, for example, we read a story of great faith and great courage, maybe we talk to God about our fears and concerns. Or maybe we've been reading and memorizing a teaching on grace, and we now talk to God about an area of our lives where we feel especially susceptible to guilt and shame. It's in these conversations where we don't just read and memorize, but we listen and we talk. We pour out our thoughts, concerns, frustrations, and joys.

Or maybe not.

THE VOICE

Maybe we sit in silence. Maybe we simply let ourselves rest before God by resting in the voice we've just heard. Meditation, conversing with God, can be as diverse as spending time with a close friend. There are times the conversation abounds with words and ideas, and there are times where the two are simply together and enjoying each other's presence. Meditation, conversing with God, is a lot like that.

With that in mind, this experience will encourage a highly personalized expression of meditation. Conversing with God is not reserved for those whose bent fits the contemplative stereotype. Examples abound, and the following is not meant to be comprehensive, but consider a few ways we may connect best with God.

The athlete—For some, their conversation with God will be worked out as they exercise or run. Their early morning hours are spent in motion, and it's while in motion that they have their clearest thoughts and most authentic encounters with God. Try to get athletes to sit down and meditate, and their thoughts will consistently wander to other things. For these, there's something about physical engagement that opens them up and enhances their conversations with God.

The artist—The artist converses with God, but the conversation reaches greatest depth not in the lengthy back and forth dialogue, but when they seemingly partner with God in a creative endeavor. Artists take a thought, an idea, a passion, or a concern, and in bringing it before God, they are inspired to express this thought artistically. The Psalms themselves are a rich example of this as many are written poetically and with great thought to choice of words and structure. Down through the ages, artists have expressed their thoughts with God in countless ways—songs, paintings, sculpture, poetry, dance—these are all examples of deep communion with God expressed in ways where mere dialogue falls short.

The writer—The writer is the person who converses with God most naturally with pen and paper. Writers write and they listen, they listen and they write. There's something about the exercise of writing their thoughts to God that takes them to depths they would not gain by limiting themselves to thought or even audible words. In the choosing of their words and the expression on the page, their thoughts gain clarity and focus. Not only do they talk to God, but in their writing they hear from God as thoughts are untangled and clarity is gained.

The list could go on. There are those who encounter God in nature, those who talk with God as they walk their dog, those who do best when they engage in a project like gardening or cooking. In truth, no one is exclusively one type or another. We all have a bit of each with an emphasis on a few. Even more, the realities of life will limit the availability of certain expressions. We may connect with God best on long walks in nature, but the accessibility of a mountain trail is yearly at best. This isn't to say we then limit our conversations, but the heart of this phase is to not only personalize the conversation with God but to personalize how the conversation happens. If we limit ourselves to a particular method, that method may miss us, and we may then miss what is most important. If the athlete, for example, thinks connection with God only happens by acting like those who are naturally contemplative, an attempt won't even be made. If, though, this person recognizes the uniqueness of his or her design, rich conversation with God awaits that person and possibilities abound.

LET'S GET PRACTICAL

A few practical suggestions will enhance this experience.

Follow Your Wandering Thoughts

Many complain of wandering thoughts while attempting a conversation with God. The frustration is understandable. When talking to a person, the person is in front of you, or on the phone, so the

THE VOICE

conversation has a tangible quality. Although talking with God is no less real, it is by nature, a spiritual conversation and therefore lacks material presence. Wandering thoughts can be a frustration, but when carefully considered, they can also be a tremendous help to our conversation with God.

Consider that the mind may wander with intention. If, let's say, while talking with God, the mind wanders to a project at work, maybe it's the project at work that is creating undue stress in your life, and it needs to be brought before God. Or if the mind wanders to thoughts of anger, greed, lust, or addictive cravings, maybe these are the issues to address with God. Rather than push the thoughts away, bring those thoughts to God. Talk to him about those desires, those frustrations, those worries, and those concerns. A wandering mind can be a tremendous ally toward honest conversation with God.

In addition, a wandering mind may also be helped by a second suggestion: journaling. There's something very powerful about moving our prayers from our minds to the page.

Journaling

Throughout the *Morph* experience, you're encouraged to keep a journal. How this journal is done will vary from person to person. As mentioned, some are writers who will take to this naturally while others are not the writing type. With that said, though, there are lessons to be learned from all types, and there are aspects of writing that will enhance most anyone's ongoing conversation with God. For those not the writing type, journaling can be done in a variety of ways, many of which fit other persuasions. Consider a few.

A single page—Journaling need not be lengthy. When Christ taught on prayer he challenged lengthy prayers when he said, “*When you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him*” (Matthew 6:7-8). There is no need for flowery language or lengthy prose. God knows what's on our minds, and it can be said in as few or as many words as are needed. Journaling, then, is often most helpful when we limit rather than lengthen our words. For those new to the exercise, consider limiting yourself to a single page or a single paragraph. As is the case in so many things, less will often mean more.

Bullet points—Another thought some will find helpful is to use the journal to chronicle your thoughts rather than transcribe them. In other words, rather than write the prayer out in its entirety, simply write a bullet point or a short sentence of what you will talk with God about. If you're of the athletic bent, this can be done before the run and again after the run is complete. By marking the thought before stepping into the conversation, we gain focus we may otherwise miss.

One word—A third thought for journaling is to consider the finding and refining of a single thought, a single phrase, or even a single word. Much of the Psalms are written as poetry. This can be done for many reasons, but even the many of us who lack poetic skill can learn something from the practice. There is power in one very refined thought. God may not be interested in lengthy dialogue but may rather be impressing upon us a single thought. This single thought can be communicated in countless ways, but one way may be in the crafting of a simple but memorable phrase we carry with us. The thought or phrase may not have the artistic quality of words from a trained poet, but if this phrase is birthed from authentic conversation with God, it will be worthy of the work it takes to get to it. The phrase may come in a single sitting, or it may take weeks or months. Either way, if we allow our journal to be a place where we not only pour ourselves out to God, but also refine a few chosen words, we will discover those thoughts from God that carry great significance and are not forgotten with the turn of a page.

THE VOICE

Carry the Conversation

This third and final suggestion is simply an acknowledgment that a conversation with God need not end. We err when we divide our spiritual life from the rest of our lives. These Conversations with God exercises are meant to inspire our conversations with God and not encapsulate them. Yes, set aside focused time to converse with God; this is critical, but view these as the beginning of the conversation. This is not to say we must keep the conversation going as if we're with a friend with whom silence is awkward, but it is to say that God is not interested in being compartmentalized. When we cut off our prayer life from the rest of our lives, we may miss out on the more profound moments with God as he speaks into the daily realities of our lives. In an effort to inspire this, consider making the Scripture memory note cards highly accessible throughout your days. As helpful as it is to review these thoughts in set aside times, its greatest power will be when we remind ourselves of God's voice while riding the ups and downs of any given day.

MORPH ME

What follows is a brief Morph Me exercise to create a personalized plan for your conversations with God. This plan is important. There is no gain in reading about a conversation with God if we then fail to actually do it. Of all the things you could gain from this *Morph* experience, the current module and the modules that follow, the deepening of your passion for God's presence transcends all else. Yes, you could cruise through these readings and exercises and learn a few things, but if you miss God's presence, the time and energy invested will be wasted. If we are to morph, we must be active, and this must not be another kick. Scripture tells us "*it is the glory of God to conceal a matter; to search out a matter is the glory of kings*" (Proverbs 25:2). God has purpose in the process. His voice is stunning, but it must be sought. It is ours to search out, to discover, to embrace, and to experience. It is when we do this that we discover the strength of this sword, in the hands of the Spirit, as the Spirit reveals the "*thoughts and attitudes of the heart*" (Hebrews 4:12).