

HE SPEAKS, I LISTEN



Michelle McKinney Hammond



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*This one is for You, Lord.
Your love has sought me,
found me, bought me, and
kept me in Your light.
You are forever my Father,
always my Friend,
eternally the Lover of my soul.*

*In loving memory of my grandmother
Sarah Ayodele Sam.
She walked with God and was not,
for God took her,
but not before she showed me Jesus.*

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*In the alone place
fear closes in
as I sense my aloneness
the part of me without You
that is lost
wandering in its own apprehensions
causing my spirit
to imitate a mime
pressing against invisible walls
that soundlessly threaten
suffocation by unconscious
yet deliberate isolation
And I long for the resuscitation
that Your breath brings
giving life to all my members
Strength to my soul
Causing me to unfold
like a wet new butterfly
fighting to unwrap itself
from the bondage of its
self-imposed cocoon
To spread new and unfamiliar members
for the very first time
testing their strength
readying these fragile members
for the act of ascending
Not caring for the fact
that it is the struggle
which produces strength
to take wing and fly*

*while resisting the urge
to cast off my independence
and call upon Your help
I weary myself
and wonder at my ability
to continue on
to rise above
where I presently lie...
This place is not kind
to my spirit's expectations
and I am lost in the prison of myself
while You patiently hold the key and wait...
wait for me to invite You into this alone place....*

The background of the page is a light gray gradient. Overlaid on this are several elegant, white, hand-drawn style swirls and flourishes that curve and loop across the page, framing the central text.

IN SOLITUDE

THE SWEET TIMES


*And the LORD God took the man, and put him into
the Garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it.*

GENESIS 2:15 KJV

Adam experienced something that no other man or woman (not even Eve) on the face of the earth has ever experienced. He had the incredible privilege of having God all to himself. In the beginning it was just him and God. Though Jesus and the Holy Ghost were present, the mystery of their Oneness was very evident. Every evening they had a date, and Adam had God's full attention. No interruptions in the prayer line. No one with a more urgent request. Just Adam and God.

Can you imagine such a sublime existence? To rise each morning and watch the sun stretch its arms across the sky in praise to God on High...to watch the flowers awaken, tilting their faces in serene worship toward their Creator while the rivers that run through the garden play a symphony of exuberant celebration against the banks of the shore and the birds sing their accompaniment, welcoming the morning and thanking God for another glorious day.... No telephone ringing, no alarm going off, no social media notifications, just the gentle breeze ever so gently rousing you, stirring your lashes, tickling your nose, almost kissing you, beckoning you to arise.... This was Adam's world. He rose to walk on a dew-covered carpet of grass, its pungent freshness filling the air with each step. Joyfully going about his tasks, anticipating his favorite time of the day....

And just about the time Adam thought he would burst with



expectation, it happened. The atmosphere in the garden changed. The animals stood still, ears tuned to something that no one saw. The birds stopped singing, waiting for a sound that was sweeter than their own. Even the wind seemed to hold its breath. And the sun came down for a closer look, leaving golden streaks across the sky to mark its place. Then the air was filled with the incense of the Lord's presence! The Lord God Himself had descended to the garden to walk and talk, face-to-face, with Adam. Nothing stood between them, for Adam was naked and unashamed. Perfect and good in every way. An extension of his Abba Father. A mirror reflection of the Trinity, spirit, soul, and body, unstained by sin.

It was...indescribable glory, this time of sweet communing. Every living thing in the garden seemed to be in a suspended state of reverent awe, clinging to God's every word. His still, small voice was like music. It was like the sound of falling rain, the sound of many waters, the ebbing of the tide. It rose and fell as He shared all that He was with Adam. God's words ignited Adam's soul and brought waves of refreshment to his spirit while Adam's worship of Him brought pleasure to His heart. It was a time of intimate fellowship...of deep communion...of unspeakable expressions and wordless impartations between man and his God. And then God withdrew with the promise of returning, His presence still lingering in the air like heady perfume.



Ah, to find our way back to the garden... This is the place in the cool of the evening of our lives when we finally grow still, finding our way back home. Back into the presence of God. Able once again to be open, vulnerable, honest, and uninhibited in the arms

of the One who loves us most. To shut out the sound of every other voice and just listen, drinking in His Spirit. It is here that the world and all of its pressures and struggles become mere shadows that fade away as His comfort surrounds us. This is where we find peace, where we find refreshment. More importantly, this is where we find the center of our own being. This is where we find the strength to begin again.

Heavenly Father, help me to find my way back to our place of intimacy. It seems I don't visit this place enough. And yet when I finally meet You here, I wonder why it took me so long. Holy Spirit, call me and draw me to this place until my flesh rejoices to yield and enter into this sweet sanctuary of fellowship with You that my soul treasures. O Lord, help me to be as consistent in seeking You as You are in seeking me. Help me to keep ever fresh in my mind the joy of our last meeting, and never to lose the longing for more of You. In Jesus' name, amen.

When was the last time you spent quality time alone with God having a real heart-to-heart exchange with Him? What would you like to share with Him now?

THE COMMUNING TIMES

*And Enoch walked with God:
and he was not; for God took him.*

GENESIS 5:24 KJV

He's out again, is he?" the visitor asked. Enoch's wife nodded her head in reply as she stirred the evening meal over the fire. "Where is it exactly that he goes?" questioned his friend, brows drawn together in perplexed punctuation. This was the third time he had tried to visit Enoch this week, only to find that he was nowhere to be found. "Wherever their conversation takes him," Enoch's wife serenely answered. She had grown used to these times. They did not frighten or disturb her. She only had to look into Enoch's eyes when he returned to know where he had been. Sometimes he was gone for an hour. Sometimes for days. And when he returned, his body weary but his eyes gleaming with a brilliant fire that burned from within, she knew he had been with God.

What they discussed she could only imagine. She herself tried to understand how it was possible for man and God to commune on such an intimate level. She tried to worship Him in the best way she knew, but she really couldn't say that God had ever spoken back. Enoch said it was because she didn't truly listen. She tried to listen, yet she heard nothing. She had grown beyond being jealous of her husband's deep, personal exchanges with God, choosing instead to let him share with her parts of their conversations. And, oh! What incredible things they were! Stories of what was to come. At first Enoch would eagerly tell these things to anyone who would

listen. But many of these revelations were too deep, too awesome to be understood by those simply trying to keep up with their daily agenda of eking out a living for themselves. So more and more Enoch withdrew to his walks with God. He still returned with that same intense light burning in his eyes, but these days he also seemed increasingly pensive, as if his spirit were deeply pondering something profound and unspeakable. This she could respect.

Amazingly, no one ridiculed Enoch. Rather, they respectfully conceded that he truly was a man who sought God diligently. All who knew him admired this, and even promised themselves that they, too, would draw closer to God as soon as they got a little extra time on their hands. It was obvious that Enoch pleased God; he was blessed above and beyond measure. No one in their right mind would ever guess that he was three hundred and sixty-five years old. Why, he didn't look a day over one hundred and he was still having children! It was as if Enoch's conversations with God renewed his strength like the eagles'. He was always so full of energy. But what could they possibly find to talk about for hours—sometimes days—on end? Though many speculated, no one volunteered to accompany Enoch as he set off to fellowship with the Lord. It would have been almost impolite to do so, a most unwelcome intrusion. Yet countless eyes followed Enoch as he walked to his place of solitude to be with... Him....

And so his wife prepared dinner and waited for his return. Once again she meditated upon how different her husband seemed these days after his time alone with God. More contemplative, lost in all he had been told. In the past he would return more vocal, warning his neighbors of God's judgment against those who were godless. But these days Enoch was silent, as if waiting for something to happen.

Slowly the night settled down around her. The embers of the

dinner fire had died, and still she waited for his return. The air around her held a tension she did not recognize, and she wondered what was different about this night. Then a voice, or perhaps it was just a quiet understanding, rose from within her spirit. "He won't be back," it whispered softly. She contemplated these words, quietly releasing her beloved husband into the hands of his Lord as she fell into a peaceful sleep.

And now here was his friend again, inquiring when Enoch would return. Why couldn't he understand what she so clearly knew? Enoch would not be back, for God had taken him. Yet this friend still insisted on searching for him. And everyone wondered at her serenity in the face of such deeply disturbing circumstances. "Poor dear," they all thought as they saw her set out, beginning the familiar pattern of her late husband. "Perhaps she will find him in one of her walks." Little did they know, it was not Enoch for whom she was seeking.



Enoch, the seventh generation born from Adam, was the fore-shadow of yet another man who would literally be translated into the heavenly realm while still wrapped in living mortal flesh. Enoch had an extraordinary relationship with God, a deep intimacy, and a reputation that brought pleasure to the heart of the Father. For this he was rewarded by escaping the sting of death. Though this is the type of relationship with God we have the best of intentions to achieve, so many things distract us away from pressing into that place with Him.

How many times do we promise to spend more time communing with our Father? How many times do we come into His presence so laden down with our own cares that we hurriedly dump

them at His feet, then dash away to extinguish yet another fire in our lives? And then we hear someone repeat something that God told them and we listen in envy, wondering, *Why doesn't God tell me things like that? Why doesn't He tell me anything, period?* With chagrin, we realize that we've been far too busy talking at God to listen to Him. And yet the only way to be translated to a place far above our circumstances is to immerse ourselves in Him.

Dear Heavenly Father, please forgive me for my misplaced priorities. Forgive me for answering the call of the world instead of stealing away with You. Although I know I was created for Your good pleasure, I spend far too much time seeking pleasures of my own. As You await me becoming a true worshiper who will worship You in spirit and in truth, I fill my world with helpless idols and seek more blatant answers that won't require any surrender or transparency on my part. And though I long to please You, I fear what I will become if I do all that You require. Help me to forsake all but Your heart and find my pleasure in pleasing You. Help me to realize that my greatest reward at the end of the day is You and the power You possess to translate me above all that binds me. In Jesus' name, amen.

What have you allowed to stand in the way of your quiet time with God? What things do you need to reprioritize in your life to get back to the place of regular fellowship with Him? What would you like to have happen in your relationship with Him? What are you willing to do in order to make that happen? Write a commitment of renewal to the Lord that you can place on your heart and run with.



He Speaks, I Listen

THE BINDING TIMES

*When the sun went down, and it was dark, behold
a smoking furnace, and a burning lamp that
passed between those pieces. In the same day
the LORD made a covenant with Abram.*

GENESIS 15:17-18 KJV

Abram didn't know if it was the night air or beholding this sight, both awesome and terrible, that caused him to be chilled to the bone. He felt every hair on his body stand on end as the presence of God saturated his understanding with visions of things that God would not speak. However, His demonstration spoke loud and clear. Abram had pondered the Lord's words all afternoon as he gathered together a heifer, a goat, a ram, a dove, and a young pigeon. "I will be your great reward..." The words echoed in his spirit as he cut each animal in two, with the exception of the birds, and arranged the halves opposite each other in obedience to God. "I will be your great reward..." *What could that possibly mean?* thought Abram. *How could God being my reward solve my immediate problems?*

He felt an ache every time he saw the look on his wife's face as she gazed at a mother holding her child. And he felt helpless. Helpless to give Sarai the one thing she truly wanted—a son. Truly, God had richly blessed them with everything else. But this one thing. This one thing was like a wet blanket snuffing out the joy of everything else. How could God being his reward resolve this conflict between joy and pain, comfort and longing? Yet Abram willingly

obeyed his Lord, preparing the animals He requested, and he waited. For the Lord had promised him descendants as numerous as the stars, and Abram believed Him. God had called him out and away from all that he was accustomed to with the promise of possessing a new land, and He had proven Himself along the way, increasing Abram's wealth in measures untold. Yet this one thing was different from any other area of his life. His other prayers had been answered almost instantly, but this one thing lingered. It became a greater question day by day. As time became a foe against his desire, his need for a greater assurance from God became increasingly pressing.

And now God had given him a sign. An awesome sign, sealing his promise to Abram that his descendants, birthed from his own seed, would be more numerous than the stars. More numerous than his ability to count. And greater still, his descendants would possess this new land that God had brought him to! This was more than he had dared hope for, yet he believed God's promise. But still this nagging need for affirmation burned within his heart. And now here in this place of meeting, as the sun sought solace from the heat of the day on the backside of the hills, Abram fought the exhaustion of his efforts to wait on God. To hear a clear word. To receive some sign, some indication that God would keep this promise he was almost afraid to cling to. Then God's whisper interrupted the dusk, answering Abram's questions with dreadful revelations as He unfolded the fate of Abram's lineage yet to come. The darkness of separation that his people would feel as they experienced the bonds of slavery in Egypt before returning to this land. Abram could not imagine this. As long as he had known God, he had known liberty and wealth.

Abram recalled the day he first heard God's voice telling him to forsake everything he held dear and follow Him away from his

family and his country to a new land that He would show him. Something told him he could trust this voice, and he followed willingly. Still, their relationship had never been tested in this way. Feeling the need for more visible support, he took his nephew Lot with him. Abram soon found out why the Lord had suggested that he go alone. God had known all along that those outside of the vision He gives become a time-consuming distraction from the true blessing that awaits. In time, Abram learned he had no need for Lot or to cling to familiar crutches, so the two men parted company. Abram came to trust God as a constant in his life; truly, He was the “friend that sticketh closer than a brother” (Proverbs 18:24 KJV).

So here Abram was—where God had wanted him to be in the first place—alone with Him. In His presence nothing overshadowed Him, not even the sun. And so in the darkness of its absence, God became Abram’s only light. As the blood flowed between the carcasses, it was joined by a smoking firepot and a flaming torch, sealing the matter between this man and his God. Yes, God would keep His word. Even this one thing was not too difficult for Him to accomplish. With this knowledge, God sealed His promise to Abram by literally putting His word on the line, making a binding covenant through the fire, the light, and the blood. And because He had no one greater to swear by, He swore by Himself to bring to pass what He had promised in His own irrevocable way.



When our desires surround our heart so tightly that we feel alone inside of our dreams, God is present lighting the way, holding a flaming torch aloft to guide our steps toward our destiny,

making us worthy to receive the promise with the purifying fire of His own holiness and the cleansing flow of sacrificial blood.

Heavenly Father, You have blessed me in so many ways that I almost feel ashamed to ask You for one more thing. And yet my heart is overwhelmed with longing and my desire weighs heavily upon my soul. I feel as if You've said yes, but the promise seems to take so long to become a manifested reality. I wonder if Your promise is simply my imagination and my own flesh willing You to be in agreement with me. As I lay my longing at Your feet once more, please speak a sure word to my spirit. Grant me Your assurance that You will come bearing the answer and lighting the way to my heart's treasure. In Jesus' name, amen.

What is the desire that you feel isolated in harboring? God has a covenant promise for you. Won't you write the vision and make it plain so you can run with His promise sealed upon your heart?

Write the reasons for your doubts. Then give them to God once and for all.
