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*The Sacred Echo*  
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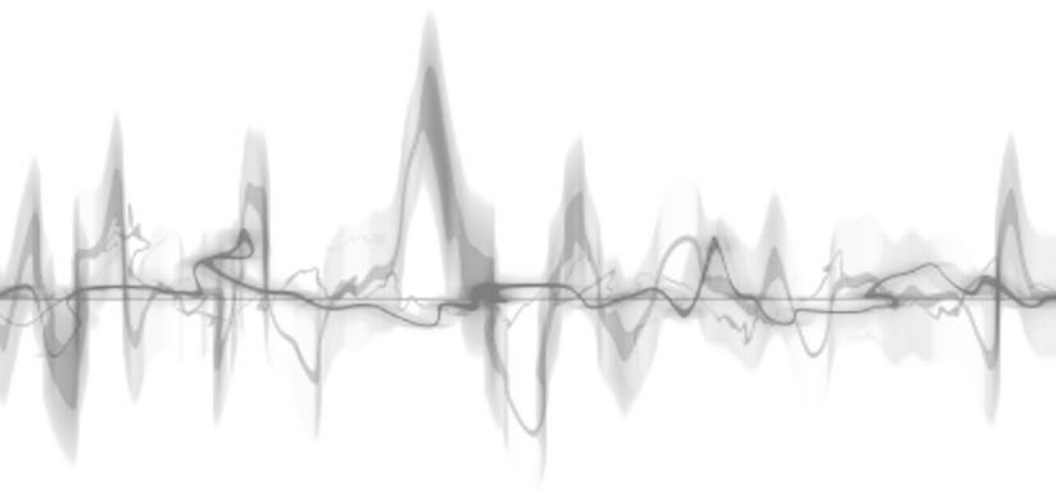
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# contents

foreword	11
exposed	15
.001 i love you	29
.002 sing it again	43
.003 how long?	57
.004 read it again	71
.005 you follow me	85
.006 if you don't wear your crown	99
.007 surrender	111
.008 take care of my people	127
.009 bring them to me	145
.010 you are not alone	167
awakened	185
<b>hidden bonus tracks</b>	
reflection	191
behind the scenes	205
connection	213
friends	215
props	221

exposed



I'm not much of a pray-er. Well, maybe that's not quite accurate. My mom, like most moms, would say I'm an answer to her prayers—after years of infertility—but as far as being one who prays, I probably leave something to be desired. I like to pray, really, I do, but if left to my own devices, most of my prayers sound a lot like scribbled grocery lists: random, disorganized, and filled with less-than-healthy selections.

A few years ago, under the conviction that I needed to do something about my crumpled, oft misplaced prayer life, I started a journal. When the dainty notebook disappeared under a chalky layer of gray dust behind the bed, so did my resolve. I discovered both a few months later. With renewed verve, I began studying contemplative prayer, centering prayer, and Scripture prayer. I tried praying standing up, sitting down, and lying on the floor. I committed to praying early in the morning before work, unless I slept in, and late at night, unless I dozed off. At one point, I started a photo prayer journal and began collecting snapshots of friends and family members in a shoebox. Those photos are still in a small cardboard box with leftover scrapbooking materials I have been meaning to get to for, well, years now. Without realizing it, I was becoming a yo-yo pray-er.

Then I had another idea. I'm still not sure where the lightbulb moment came from or how I can get another, but I decided to ditch the prayer journals altogether and develop a much simpler method. I created a prayer list in the back of my Bible on one of those blank, crispy-thin white sheets that serve as the extras in any Scripture binding. That way I couldn't easily misplace the list. Okay, technically I still could, but generally I lose my keys, sunglasses, and wallet—even my car in the parking lot of Costco—long before I ever lose my Bible. That's not to say it couldn't happen, but for over ten years, I've managed to carry the same well-worn, leather volume.

Now to write in your Bible is a serious thing, but to write prayers with the permanence of ink symbolized commitment not just to God but also to the people involved. I began my list slowly, selectively. Immediate family. Specific friends. Over the course of several weeks, names came to mind and stubbornly refused to leave. I carefully recorded each name, double-checking the spelling, using a black pen for consistency.

That was several years ago. Today, the list boasts different shades of blue, a flower-like doodle, and several coffee-colored stains and includes friends and nemeses, hopes and dreams, organizations and nations. Prayers and petitions, adoration and repentance, line the page. Like my grocery list, it's still a bit random to the casual observer, but through my

the Sacred echo

conversations with God, prayer comes alive with a rhythm all its own.

Though prayer is much more than asking God for things, this single page in the back of my Bible remains a stark portrait of my faith.

Anyone can believe in God, perform the ritualistic rat-a-tat-tat of giving mental assertion, and even modify their behavior in response to a belief system, but prayers of petition force one to live eyes wide open to see what God may do or leave undone. I didn't realize that fateful day when I decided to turn my scribbled thoughts into a permanent list that I was accepting the invitation to not only ask God specific things but also to listen and watch for the answer—if one was given at all.

When I run my finger down the page, I realize most of my petitions haven't changed for years.

Bless.

Protect.

Redeem.

Heal.

Restore.

Reconcile.

Renew.

Guide.

Such requests are embarrassingly simple, yet God has listened to every one. As I reflect on this list—which is beginning to look war-torn over the years—I find myself marveling at the wonder of it all. God knows more about the people on the list than I ever will, and he loves them more deeply. He knows my prayers before they even leave my lips. If the God of the universe already knows everything before it happens, why do I bother praying, let alone engage in persistent prayer? Why keep tugging on God’s sleeve day after day, month after month, year after year, with the same raggedy list of requests?

While struggling with these kinds of questions, I can’t help but think of Jesus’ parable of the tenacious widow who demanded justice. Though the local judge was a man without conscience ruling on matters however he saw fit, he finally caved and granted the woman’s request. Why? Not because of the wisdom of her arguments, the eloquence of her speech, or the testimony of witnesses. He gave in simply because she was a nag and wore him down.

Interestingly, *nudnik* is the Yiddish word used by some Jewish translators to describe the bothersome widow. As a child, I often hovered behind my Jewish grandmother as she cooked, hoping for a scrumptious treat like a misshapen matzo ball or potato latke. She’d look at me sternly and say, “Stop being a *nudnik*!” Fortunately, I knew the secret every Jewish

the Sacred echo

grandchild knows: If you pester long enough, your efforts will be rewarded.

Jesus uses the parable to make the case that if an unkind judge grants justice because of a nagging widow, how much more will God grant justice to his own children who cry out to him day after day?

Though I am grateful that he gives ear to those who have the tenacity to ask and keep on asking, I can't help but wonder:

Why?

Why pray a prayer a hundred times when God knew my heart's desire before the words left my lips the first time? Why cry out for justice repeatedly when God knows the depths of need more than I ever will? Why echo a prayer when God has already heard it countless times before? Though the *nudnik* woman was granted her request, how many others are denied every day—despite their persistence and perseverance? Why does prayer have to be so mysterious?

More than anything, I want to pray with the confidence that God will not only hear my words but act on them, and I want to listen with the confidence that when God speaks, I will recognize his voice and readily obey. I want a relationship with God where prayer is as natural as breathing. If God is the one in whom we are to live and move and have our being, then



I want my every inhale infused with his presence, my every exhale an extension of his love.

Yet even after a morning of focused prayer and study, an afternoon of life-changing conversation, or an evening listening to soul-stirring worship and teaching, I often find myself wondering: *God, was that really you? Was that your presence or my emotions? Was that your voice or my own?*

With so much unsure footing, I've been foraging the Scriptures for answers. I keep coming back to a familiar story of God's voice in the life of the prophet Elijah. Called to take on the false gods and unrighteous leaders of his day, Elijah finds himself on the run, a burned out, exhausted prophet who wants to give up. In 1 Kings 19, Elijah hits rock bottom and is ready to throw in the towel. God asks Elijah a simple but profound question: "What are you doing here, Elijah?" (v. 9).

Elijah's prophetic nature reminds him that God isn't a fan of phonies. He doesn't hold back: "I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the sons of Israel have forsaken Your covenant, torn down Your altars and killed Your prophets with the sword. And I alone am left; and they seek my life, to take it away."

The prophet's life is on the line, yet God doesn't answer one of his concerns. For a hiccup of a moment, this passage makes

the Sacred echo

me feel better about myself. I am not the only one whose laundry list of prayers seems to go unanswered.

Then God instructs Elijah to do something unusual: go stand on the side of a mountain and wait. I can only imagine the internal conversation Elijah was having with himself about God and the entire situation as he huffed across the rocky edge.

Standing thousands of feet above sea level, Elijah feels the wind pick up. Before he realizes what is happening, hurricane-force winds rip apart rock formations all around him. Then without warning, the wind calms. Next Elijah feels a rumbling under his feet. The prophet recognizes the unmistakable sounds of an earthquake. When the shaking finally stops, Elijah looks around skittishly. What's next?

That's when he sees the flames coming toward the mountain. Fire erupts all around, smoke filling the air. Elijah tries to buffer his face and mouth. Before he fully comprehends what's going on, the flames and smoke vanish, and Elijah experiences what he has been waiting for: God finally draws near to the worn-out prophet—in the quiet, gentle sound of a whisper.

Throughout this passage, we're reminded:

The Lord was not in the wind.

The Lord was not in the earthquake.

The Lord was not in the fire.

Yet God used a chain of natural—no, *supernatural*—events to prepare Elijah for an encounter with himself. The repeated display of power in the wind, earthquake, and fire didn't just get Elijah's attention—it also kept it.

God addresses the prophet, "What are you doing here, Elijah?"

Elijah offers a familiar answer, but this time God responds differently. He provides Elijah with specific instruction, encouragement, and even companionship. Our outrageously generous God provides for this torn-up prophet physically with food, emotionally with friendship, relationally with a wingman, Elisha, and spiritually with encouragement. God whispers life back into the prophet.

This story has always reminded me of just how much I need to be able to recognize God's whispers—those moments when he draws near and breathes words of life into my soul.

As I've continued to reflect on this passage, I've begun seeing something new that has been slowly transforming my prayer life and relationship with God. Namely, neither the wind, earthquake, or fire happened apart from God's knowledge or permission. In fact, God used these repeated demonstrations to prepare Elijah for an encounter with himself. And like an echo, God often uses the repetitive events and themes in daily life to get my attention and draw me closer to himself.

the Sacred echo

Now instead of just listening for God's whisper, I am trying to recognize the sacred echoes—those moments when God speaks the same message to my heart again and again. I call them *sacred echoes* because I've noticed that throughout my relationships, daily life, and study, the same scripturally sound idea or phrase or word will keep reappearing until I can no longer avoid its presence. Is this mere coincidence or is there something more?

When it comes to hearing from God, I firmly believe the Bible is our source and authority. God's Word is like a megaphone to his people. We recognize his voice best when we spend time listening to what he has to say through Scripture on a daily basis. Not only is God's Word the primary source of hearing from God, it is also our standard for filtering through the countless messages that bombard our minds and hearts each day. I love the description Paul gives to the Berean Jews: "They received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so."

Though God's Word is our only source of indisputable truth, I cannot skip by the many passages of the Bible that illustrate how God speaks to his people. Throughout Scripture God speaks through kings and queens, princes and prophets, poets and pilgrims. He speaks through weather patterns, barnyard animals, and even the stars in the sky. God is not

only creative, but he is persistent in getting our attention and communicating with us.

As I grow in my relationship with God, I find that he often uses the repetition of a phrase or word or idea represented in Scripture not only to get, but also to keep my attention. Like the persistent widow, God is a *nudnik* of sorts when it comes to drawing me back to himself. And I'm grateful. While a single whisper usually leaves me unsure, the repetitive nature of a sacred echo gives me confidence that God really is prompting, guiding, or leading. The sacred echo reminds me to pay close attention; something important may be going on here. The sacred echo challenges me to prayerfully consider how God is at work in my own life as well as the lives of those around me. The sacred echo is an invitation to spiritual awakening.

More and more, I'm finding that I need the sacred echo—the persistent voice of God—almost as if my life depended on it. The sacred echo reminds me he has not departed, he is steadfast, and he has not given up on me. If truth be told, as I grow older, I'm finding I need more certainty—not less—in responding to God's prompting in my life. Faith is not just moving forward when God seems far off. Faith is sometimes waiting until he is near to take the first step.

I am now taking one of those steps. I am about to share some of my most intimate prayers with you, those people and places and things I pray for steadily, sometimes with no reply, as well

the Sacred echo

as those tender words I hear God echoing in my life time and time again. To be completely honest, sharing these things scares me. The fear isn't so much that you'll think I'm crazy, because at some point, I am confident you will.

My real fear is in being laid bare. Prayer is the place where I'm invited to present the parts of myself that no one else sees to a God who already knows and loves me anyway. You see, for me, my relationship with God is one of the most personal things I have. The tenderness of his presence. The longing to linger with him. The love that grips my heart and won't let go. I am in love—that I won't deny. As in any serious love affair, some things are meant to be kept just between the two of you. The problem is that for months now I've been sensing this consistent nudge to share what I'm discovering about God. This holy prodding has become so loud and clear through conversations, sermons, and books that even my husband, Leif, can hear it. Though I feel like I'm walking in obedience, I still can't shake the fear of transparency, because the words God speaks to my heart expose me like no other. In his love, God doesn't allow me to hide behind a handful of hastily plucked fig leaves. He wants to bring everything into the light.

Most of the prayers found in the upcoming pages center around my steady petitions and the toughest questions I ask God. There are many other aspects of prayer to explore—and I pray that you will. I know that I have a long way to go and

grow in my understanding of God, but at the moment this is where I am. This is where I've been. This is also how far I still have to go.

You're about to discover some of the sacred echoes—the persistent voice of God—in my life. Through them I expect that the Spirit will further illuminate his presence in your life. You will hear his voice. You will feel his gentle prodding. You will find rest in the love he sings over you. My prayer is that you will begin to discover God's voice in your life not just as a whisper but also as an echo, and that you'll experience a contagious spiritual awakening that can only come from knowing God.

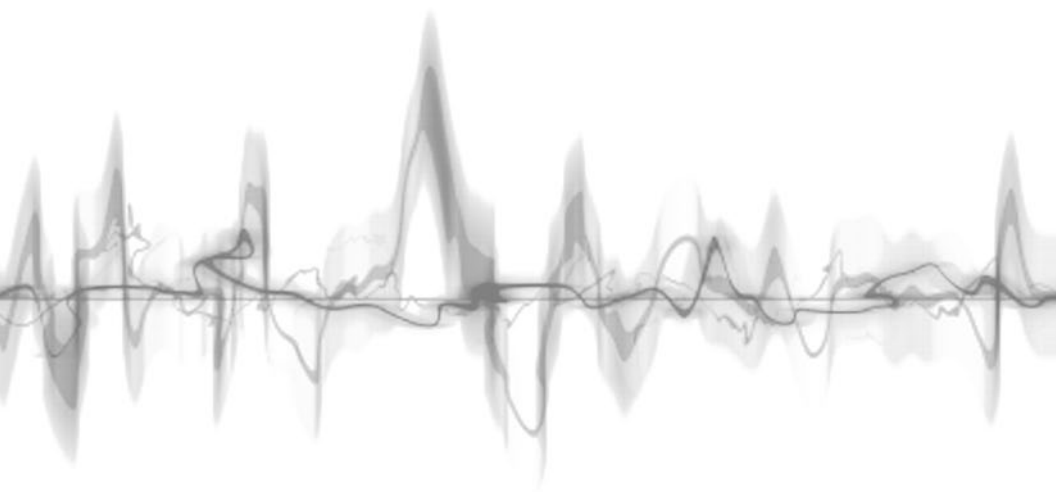
*Blessings,*

*Margaret*





.001 i love you



My mother is a natural lifelong learner, a lover of knowledge, and a hardcore trivia buff. Growing up, I was often annoyed by my mother's in-depth knowledge of everything from rock formations to sea life to plant growth. I considered her information addiction annoying at best, except for one small problem: I turned out just like her.

Now I experience the same mini-high when I learn something new or make a discovery. I want to share my connect-the-dot moments with everyone I meet—whether they want to hear them or not. I am my mother's daughter. Because of my info-neurosis, I actually keep a file of news stories in my desk to satisfy my trivia addiction.

Some of the articles in my file simply confirm what most of us already know. Like, did you know teens average an hour more of sleep each night than their parents? I have the study to prove it. Some of the clippings are reminders that small things can make a big difference. For instance, did you know that the average American tosses out seven and a half pounds of garbage each day? Seems like a good reason to recycle. Some of the clippings just make me feel better about myself. One

of my all-time favorites, "Fat-bottomed Girls Are Smarter," includes a study of more than 16,000 women that found curvy girls (and their moms) outsourced skinny chicks on standardized tests. Now that's good trivia.

One of the articles that recently made its way into my collection was on bat sonar. Random, I know, but that goes with the territory of being an info-maniac. Bats fascinate scientists because of their ability to see in the dark using the echoes of their ultrasonic calls. They send out a frequency that illuminates the environment so they can travel safely in the dark. Pretty cool. While most bats emit their ultrasonic calls from their mouths, about 300 species fire it out of their noses. The process is called echolocation.

Like most snappy words, echolocation percolates in my mind because of its precision in describing a scientifically inexplicable process. Additional research reveals that scientists are still grappling to understand a lot about bats. For example, if a bat is feeding in the dark and you throw a pebble in its trajectory, the creature will dodge the rocky bullet. But if a large insect crosses the same bat's trajectory, the bat will fly toward the savory snack. In less than a second, a bat is able to determine whether he's encountering food or foe. Even with modern technology and gizmos, scientists still can't create a device that emulates what a bat does naturally.

Sandwiched safely in my file drawer, the story piques my

the Sacred echo

spiritual imagination. When it comes to prayer, all too often, I feel like a bat with broken sonar. I go through life when something unidentifiable—a decision, an opportunity, a possibility—enters my trajectory. I don't know how to respond. At the last possible moment, I finally remember to cry out, *"God, is this a trap or a treat?"*

Thwack!

It's like I'm flying in the dark with regards to my relationship with God. Though I have a hunch he's there somewhere, I can't see him. I do what comes naturally. I let out a sound, a solo prayer, and wait to see what, if anything, comes back.

Like echolocation, there's a lot about the process of prayer that's still a mystery.

I wish prayer was simple, clean, and clear instead of complex, messy, and complicated. I wish hearing from God was as easy as clipping articles and slipping them into a drawer. Then, I could simply open a file anytime and find the exact answer, direction, and encouragement I needed in the moment.

Instead, I find myself calling out to God, hoping he's listening, fingers crossed for a reply. Some people call that faith. For me, it's desperation. The very act of prayer demands vulnerability—an acknowledgement that I don't have all (if any) of the answers, I can't do things on my own, and I'm in need. Intimate prayer is disrobing.

Sometimes after I've poured my head and heart out to God, I'll take a breath long enough to ask, "*God, what's on your heart?*"

On more occasions than I can remember, I have experienced a single word response to this question as an echo in my soul:

*You.*

Like a feather gently resting on a silky blanket, the word lies soft and tender on my soul. In my heart and mind, it's like God is saying, *I love you*. In those moments, the concerns and weights I've unleashed in prayer disappear, and I am enveloped in the height, depth, and width of God's love. I find myself caught up in praise, worship, and adoration. I don't want to leave; I don't want to let go of thanking God. Though my desire for God is great, it's sadly not long until I lose that sense of wonder in the midst of daily duties. Like a hotline to God, prayer is available throughout the day, but I find myself forgetting to pick up the phone.

In my mind, I know that God loves me every day, but it's far too rare when I feel it in my heart. When those occasions arrive, I want to savor them like the finest chocolate.

As far as my relationship with God, I sometimes feel like Dory in the animated movie *Finding Nemo* or Lucy (played by Drew Barrymore) in *50 First Dates*. Wide-eyed and playful, I have chronic spiritual short-term memory loss. Almost as if each

the Sacred echo

time God speaks, it's just like the first time—even if he's said something a dozen times before. I sit in wonder of God's voice—in the depth, the resolution, and the awe of the encounter. Then, I stop long enough to think, "Hey, that sounds familiar! I think I've heard something like that before."

*I love you.* Oh yeah! God really does love me!

In his grace, God reminds me once again that his love is true, his love is real. In those moments, I can't help but wonder, *God, why do you have to keep telling me you love me? Shouldn't I already know that by now? Am I just spiritually forgetful or is there something more?*

I've been so bothered by this issue that I have turned to friends, fellow followers, and even Bible scholars to try to decipher why. Most respond with some variation of the same answer: God uses repetition, because you don't hear him the first time.

While that answer contains truth, something about the explanation feels thin to me. The idea that God speaks repetitively because we're slow to comprehend essentially paints a portrait of God's children as toddlers. While there may be some truth in that as evidenced by my own Dory-and-Lucy-like tendencies, I'm not satisfied with the answer. I read of too many men and women in the Bible, including Noah, Abraham, and Mary, who responded to God's voice the first time.

A thicker, more substantial answer is that God speaks

frequently and repetitively because we're so easily distracted. Like a surprise guest at a party, distraction can make a stealth entrance at an opportune time and steal the show. Maybe one of the primary reasons God echoes is so we keep our focus on the most important, not just the most imminent.

While that response makes more sense in my mind and heart, I have a hunch that the reason behind the sacred echo goes even deeper: God is relationally driven. The sacred echo emanates simply out of who he is and his desire to connect with us. Think about it for a moment: Why does God speak the same core messages throughout Scripture? *I love you. I love you. I love you.*

Most, if not all, of the sacred echoes of God throughout the Bible orbit around the idea of relationship. God offers countless incentives for engaging in a relationship with him and strategically instructs us to avoid any attitudes or activities that impede that relationship. Indeed, God is relationally driven. He whispers, he speaks, and he echoes, because he wants to be with us in thought, word, and deed.

That's why when I open the Bible I don't just find instructions for life or a history book, but I also discover a series of love letters. From Genesis to Revelation, God's love expresses itself in countless ways, stories, and lives. God and his love are manifested in the person of Jesus and demonstrated through his life, death, resurrection, and promise of imminent return.